

Hyouketsu Kyoukai no Eden

Volume 2 - Forbidden Crystal



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「お前に理由はあるのか。
千年獅になる明確な理由が？」

「守るって約束した女の子がいるから」

氷結鏡界の エデン

2

禁断水晶

"Do you have a reason? A definite reason for wanting to be a Sennenshi?"

"Because there is a girl who I promised to protect."



"What sort of world will the Dream of Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> show you?"

"I've found Shel-nii!"

"Long time no see!"

"Even if we cannot touch each other's hands, we still can convey our feelings via words."

"There was a young man who was a guard, whom I admired. That's all there is to it."

"There is another reason for Sennenshi to protect their Priestess."

"You absolutely cannot let anyone else find out about the mateki in your body."



たとえ世界の理に否定されても、
彼女のもとに帰ることだけは譲れない —

Even if it is unacceptable to the ways of this world, returning to her side is the only thing I won't give up—

プロローグ

『^{すべて}全てあの日から——少年——』

第一章

『再入宮』

第二章

『^{こりつ}孤立』

断章

『動きだす夜』

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『^{ウダダ}浮遊諸島、知られざる意思に^{いざな}誘われ』

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第四章

『^{さいしやう}禁断水晶』

終章

『全てあの日のように、
そうありますように——少年たち——』

エピローグ

『彼の守ったものは』

あとがき

300

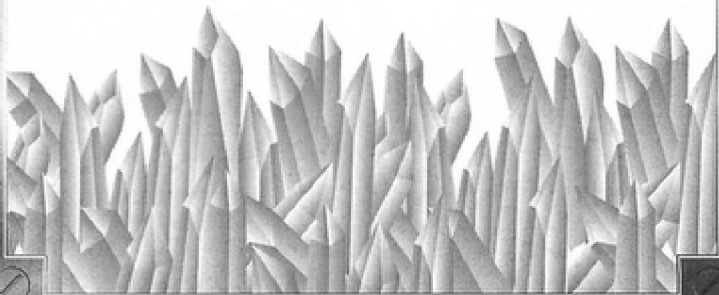
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Story & Characters

[illegible]

幽幻種と呼ばれる存在に侵攻を受ける世界。巫女の祈る守護結界に守られた浮遊大陸オービエ・クレアでのみ、人は生きることができた。大陸の外——機軸の庭(エデン)に墮ちたことで禁断の呪力を宿したシェルティスは、護士の身分を剥奪され、天結宮(ソフィア)から追放された。それから3年後。幽幻種による天結宮への大侵攻をきっかけに、シェルティスは再入宮を許される。幼なじみの巫女ユミとも再会し、彼女の護衛・千年樹になることを誓うのだが……。

巫女の5位

ユミィ・エル・スフレニクトール

Ymy Ele Soufflenictole

洗礼系の術式を得意とする優しい少女。シェルティスの幼なじみであり、現在は専属護衛をもたない

約束した。
必ず君のもとにたどり着く、と。

異端の少年／護士候補生

シェルティス・マグナ・イール

Sheltis Magna Yehle

双剣使いの少年。穢歌の庭(エデン)に落下したことで、禁断の呪力・魔術(まてき)をその身に宿した

氷結鏡界の巫女を頂点とする護法院。 その階級図と、天結宮における活動階層

氷結鏡界の折り手たち

サラが続べる5人の巫女と
その専属護衛・千年獅



巫女の4位
春蕾・ピアヌクレネン
Syun-rei Pia Nucleene

領域系の術式が得意。
対人恐怖症



春蕾の千年獅
レオン・ネストリウス・オーヴァ
Leon Nestorius Ova

大剣使い。シェルティスの旧友

皇姫サラ

Salah

沁力による氷結鏡
界を司る存在



錬護士／50人

れんごし

幹部級、隊長級の階級。護士の
頂点である千年獅の候補たち。
一大隊50人につき、10人前後

正護士& 巫女見習い

せいごし&みこみならい

200人

護法院における正式な隊員階
級。200人のうち9割が正護士、
1割が巫女見習い

護士候補生

ごしこうほせい

950人

護法院の構成員総数の8割が、
この階級に所属。候補生は天結
宮の正式なメンバーとはみなさ
れない

Prologue: It all begins on that day —young man—

"The time now is 24 hour and 00 minutes."

"Beginning special training of mock scenario #03."

"Confirming the location of enemies via far-sight, they are approaching us..... Here they come!"

I shouted towards the three guards in my team.

The place I was pointing to was the dense forest no more than ten meters in front of us. At the same time, I could feel a spine-chilling nervousness that was spreading throughout the team.

..... My lips felt so dry.

..... No, I must concentrate.

All of my three teammates lifted their weapons - great sword, broadsword, and heavy firearms. I clutched my chest tightly

My weapon is something that belongs only to me, and is different from the rest of the three. It is the arts of shinryoku of an apprentice-Priestess.

The next instance.

A dark purple mist erupted from within the dense forest.

"It's a Yuugenshu!"

I had no idea who shouted that.

The mist 'object' appeared from within the forest next, as though to answer the call of my teammate.

The mist was pulsating like a living thing. Its four limbs and head were hidden in the mist, and one could only see a pair of ruby-like eyes shining brightly.

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Sia Sec elis arc..... Is io Miel

<I hope to dream once again, the dreams of that day.....>

A shinryoku barrier constructed using the special language of the Priestesses.

A power that can permeates miracles throughout the world, and is thus named as 'shinryoku'. It is a wave that appears as someone is praying, which can create all sorts of miracles - the source of energy of the barrier.

The transparent blue light expanded, as though it was blessing everyone—

But it was still too late.

The mateki of Yuugenshu was quicker, and struck onto us.

At that instance, the training ended.

"Time's up. Mock scenario #03 [Anti-Mateki training] ends right here."

"Results of damage caused by mateki - all members are dead, including apprentice-Priestess Monica. This constitutes as a 'fail'. Please submit your reports within three days."

A mechanical voice reported the results with a calm voice.

All that happened within an instant..... And it ended up as a failure, before I could do anything.

"Uh..... Urm..... I am really sorry!"

I apologized quickly to the three people who was smiling bitterly in front of me.

"Well, everyone's bound to fail some times, so don't take it to heart. Just reflect on it, and make sure it don't happen again."

The captain nudged the barrel of his machine gun onto the Yuugenshu with a *klang*.

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Or more specifically, a mechanical dummy replicating the looks of a Yuugenshu. It's the same for the mateki - it was harmless rays of light created with the ingenious use of mist and black light.

"But Monica, should that be an actual battle, we would all be annihilated by the mateki of Yuugenshu already. Since you are an apprentice-Priestess, you should be able to handle the mateki of Yuugenshu."

"..... Right."

"It will be fine if you understand that. Alright, it's about time I go to sleep."

Everyone returned to their own rooms after the training. As for me, I ran out of the first floor of *Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>*, into the training grounds by myself.

It was late night, and most guards and apprentice-Priestesses of *Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>* should be sound asleep by then. Silently going to the training grounds in the middle of the night had already become something that I must do every single day.

"..... Is he here today as well?"

I secretly peeked out from the huge tree next to the training grounds—

Kin!

Two silver slashes of the swords cleaved through the dark.

..... There!

He was a guard wielding dual swords. A teenage boy with tea-red hair, wearing a black ceremonial clothing. His slim, slender frame of a teenage boy was coupled with a slightly childlike and androgynous face. He was probably as old as me - somewhere around fifteen or sixteen? Or perhaps even younger.

What shocked me was the incredibly impressive swordplay of his.

One, two, three and four strikes. He swung his swords gracefully, with a smooth flow of actions. I could not follow his speedy movements with my eyes, despite watching from a distance away.

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There was not a single pause. The affluent streaks of his swords had no hesitation in them.

"....."

I could not pry my eyes away from that scene for a long, long time.



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It was not due to the remarkable swordplay of his. He silently swung his dual swords daily - in the middle of the night when everyone else was still in their slumber, and during early mornings before everyone was awake. It was that hardworking attitude of his which attracted me deeply.

"..... I will have to work harder too."

As I looked on, it felt like I had gained the courage to do so.

That teenage boy must have put in a great deal of time and effort, to possess such exceptional abilities. That could not be any more clearer, after witnessing his training with my very own eyes.

I will have to work harder, so as not to fall behind.

I'll work harder and harder, and then..... Some day, I will become a true Priestess.

I gave a huge nod, and turned my back towards him.

The teenage boy was still behind me swinging his swords. He will definitely continue training even after I left.

..... If..... If I can become a Priestess.

..... At then, I hope my personal guardian will be—

I left the scene as I hid that small thought of mine deep down into my heart.

However, the dream of that day will never be fulfilled.

The teenage boy whom I admired died while on a mission, by falling off the floating continent into *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>.

..... I heard about the news only after several weeks from that day.

Chapter 1: Reentering the palace

{1}

Floating continent Orbie Clar.

A piece of land that floats ten thousand meters above the endless sea of ice, and protected by the barriers maintained by five Priestesses - the only place where humans can live on.

In the center of the continent stood a tall tower.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>. It is a giant tower that is two thousand meters tall, and has a total of two hundred and ninety-one floors. At its grounds—

"Morning, Sheltis. What a beautiful morning."

"..... Fascinating. The sun is about to rise, and I have not even slept yet."

That was how this morning started for the seventeen year-old Sheltis.

A color of dark red was slowly mixing into the vast pale black skies. At a time when it is not even dawn yet, and the chirps of the birds could not be heard—

"Yeah, the weather for today looks fine too."

"..... Mmm."

Sheltis went along with the strangely excited mechanical voice, as he tried to shake off his sleepiness.

The casually trimmed tea-red colored hair, and eyes that matched. An androgynous face. Along with a black jacket worn over his white shirt.

"According to the data gathered from the cloud patterns, wind direction and wind speed around the floating continent, today's weather will be sunny, and the probability of rain is close to zero. A great day to wash your clothes."

"..... Yeah, it is a great day to do so."

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"An outdoor picnic is a another good option as well. As of the current season, the leaves are dyed in the bright greens of summer."

"..... Yeah, a picnic's not bad."

"Sheltis?"

The mechanical female voice finally slowed down as she stopped her endless chatter.

"You seem rather listless. Anything wrong?"

"Well, the thing is....."

He lowered his head to look at the *crystal machine* <Iris>, and mumbled.

"The thing is?"

"..... Why do I have to stay up all night to sweep the grounds of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>?"

As he held on to the old-styled broom, Sheltis complained softly.

"That's because eight hours ago, the swordplay training between Leon and you was overly intense. It resulted in you two slashing up all the leaves to the grounds of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>."

"No..... wait—! That was obviously done by Leon. You saw that too, Iris!"

"Ah— Indeed, that was shocking. The leaves were blown down just by the wind pressure from that swords of his."

"..... That muscled moron."

In front of him, were heaps of leaves he had gathered.

As he looked at the fruits of his own work through the whole night, he added in yet another sigh to the countless ones which he had done before.

"And why am I the only one who is cleaning this up! Isn't Leon part of this mess as well?"

"Because—"

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In response to that question, the *crystal machine* <Iris> replied with a straightforward tone,

"Leon's job is to protect the Priestesses. Cleaning up is not part of his job scope."

"..... Damn, he's sly."

As he leaned onto the broom in his hands, Sheltis gave a low moan of protest.

The pure white structure was giving off a faint glow amid the pale black sky. The tall tower was named the '*Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>' due to the sight of it stretching into the skies. Sheltis was granted entry into the palace just three days ago.

"Sigh— So Leon's in the tower right now? I am so damn sleepy....."

"He is the guardian of the Priestesses, so he should be somewhere on the highest floors."

The Queen and her five Priestesses - thanks to protective barriers maintained through their prayers, the floating continent has survived till today. *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> is a building that was constructed especially for the Queen and her Priestesses.

"It will be great if Sheltis can quickly obtain the same status as Leon's."

"You mean the status of a Sennenshi?"

The guards of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> are in charge of protecting the Priestesses. Everyone is skilled in a certain martial art of weapons - out of which, the strongest five guards will be granted the highest position, the 'Sennenshi', and become the personal guardians of the Priestesses.

"Yes, that's what I meant. Do your best."

"..... You made that sound really easy."

"You were just a step away from being a Sennenshi three years ago, no? You have risen to the rank of Cadres at the age of fourteen. Back then everyone was saying the speed of your promotion is something that rarely happens."

— That was then.

Upon hearing the casual tone of the *crystal machine* <Iris>, Sheltis shook his head.

"No one will believe all of that should I bring it up now. All of my past records have already been deleted."

"Right. Since everyone thought you had already died."

"..... There you go with your satirical speech again."

Everything started three years ago.

The accident in which he fell into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, ten thousand meters beneath the floating continent. He miraculously survived, but was expelled from *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. After losing his right to be a guard, Sheltis began living in the living sector as a commoner.

"After being expelled for two years, you have finally returned to the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, and yet your rival Leon has already reached the ranks of a Sennenshi, the highest position available for the guards. On the other hand, you have to start afresh from the bottom as a cadet guard. How should I put it? You are extremely unlucky to have faced such different treatment, compared to Leon."

"Shut up."

He flicked the *crystal machine* <Iris> in front of his chest with his fingers, and grabbed onto the broom tightly.

"..... Still, this is strange. I am already back in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, so why am I here sweeping throughout the night, instead of going through the training of the guards?"

"Ah, speaking of which. The enrollment ceremony for the cadet guards is at nine o'clock this morning."

It had been three days since Sheltis had entered the palace as a guard - the protectors of the Priestesses. All he had done was go through the typical admin stuff like a series of health checkups, interviews and room allocations for the time being.

"You should be meeting the instructor and your fellow cadet guards at today's enrollment ceremony as well, right?"

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"Yup yup..... Mmm, this can't go on. I'm getting out of here!"

He placed the broom against the tree trunk, and clenched his fist tightly.

"Ooh, that's some impressive enthusiasm coming from you! But are you done with cleaning up?"

"Yeah. I can't possibly attend the enrollment ceremony with my current sleepy state. It will be bad if I leave a bad impression on the others."

"I think it is just you not wanting to continue sweeping the grounds."

"Ah— Ah— I can't hear that. I heard not a single word of what you have said."

Sheltis turned his face away from the teasing of *crystal machine* <Iris>, and headed towards the main doors of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, eleventh story - dormitory of the cadet guards—

For the sky-scraping tower with two hundred and ninety-one floors, this is nearly the lowest story of the whole tower. Starting from this story and along with the next few floors, have all been designated as rooms for the cadet guards.

"Ah, as expected. The lights are out here as well."

Sheltis glanced around the dimly lit passageway.

After walking out of the lifts that operated around the clock, all Sheltis could see was a silent and dark passageway that extended endlessly.

"Of course. It's just four in the morning. Even the morning practice will not begin till an hour later."

"Ah, the term 'morning practice' sounds rather nostalgic."

Typically, the cadet guards will start their training from nine in the morning, under the supervision of the instructor.

However, the self-training in the early mornings is something of an unwritten rule among the cadet guards. If they do not have such burning passion, they will not be able to stand out from the rest among the intensive competition to graduate into an official guard.

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"..... So I'll be training one hour later?"

"Since the enrollment ceremony is held today, it should be fine if you reach the training grounds by nine."

"Really? Yes! I'll rest till then!"

"Mhmm. There will be a bunch of training waiting for you tomorrow, so you better enjoy it while you can for today."

"Stop that, or I won't be able to sleep..... Right, where's my room again?"

He stopped walking, and looked at the doors of the rooms that had lined up along the passageway.

Since there is close to a thousand cadet guards, there has to be enough rooms to house all of them. As such, the sides of the passageway are nothing else but rooms after rooms.

"Let's see, it should be the third room after the junction..... Ah, here we are."

The cards given to all the cadet guards serves as their badges, as well as the keys to their rooms. The electronic authentication code is the electronic key that opens the room.

—Acknowledged—

The lock to the door disengaged itself along with the mechanical tone, and the door slowly opened to the side.

Just the bed alone takes up about half of the single rooms used by the cadet guards. There was barely enough space left for a small desk and chair, and thus there was no need for them to fret about the arrangements of the furniture.

"..... I'm beat!"

Sheltis collapsed onto his bed after giving out a huge sigh.

"Ahhh— that's a little too slack of you, Sheltis."

Just then, the naggy *crystal machine* <Iris> began to give off flashes of light.

"Your jacket will get creased when you wake up if you do not remove it now. And don't forget to wash your hands and rinse your mouth, or else you will catch a cold. Ah, you have to

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place your shoes in their proper position. And most importantly, you shouldn't forget the skin care for the *crystal machine* <me>! You'll have to wipe the crystal surface with a piece of clean cloth. The pressure applied cannot be too hard or too weak. You should gently wipe it as if you were caressing it."

"Mmm, I'll do everything. Except for the last part."

"Ehhh? Hmph— That's just too mean!"

"..... I'll look into it after a snooze. Please help me switch off the lights."

Within seconds, the lighting on the ceiling was switched off.

It was as though the white lights of the sun had disappeared, and replacing that was the blue glows of the night.

That was no ordinary light - the source of light came from the thousands of stars that formed a sea on the ceiling. There was also the exceptionally visible moon which was giving off a hazy blue glow.

Planetarium. The *crystal machine* <Iris> had recorded the night skies of Orbie Clar, and projected the image onto the ceiling.

"..... It's beautiful. But sorry, I'm gonna sleep."

"That's fine. This is just to entertain myself. I mean, I am a *machine* <girl> who gazes at the stars - doesn't that sound really romantic?"

"Right, right."

Sheltis gave a casual reply, and closed his eyes—

"Ah, Sheltis. It's a shame, but it's time for your training."

Having heard the words of the *crystal machine* <Iris>, Sheltis originally thought that she was just joking.

"Mmm? What are you talking about, Iris? That starts at nine in the morning, right?"

"Because Leon's here."

Just as the *crystal machine* <Iris> finished her sentence.

"Sheltis! It's time to train!"

The door to the room opened all of a sudden, and a silver-haired young man wearing a pure white coat shouted into the room.

"You..... you~~..... you....."

Sheltis immediately leap out of his blanket and off his bed.

"What the hell are you doing, Leon!?"

"What am I doing? It's time for practice. I'm just here to wake you up."

Leon crossed his arms with a calm expression.

His height is fitting of the long coat that he was wearing, which is coupled with the awe-inspiring, handsome and fair look of his. The young man is said to be the strongest great sword wielder of the whole floating continent, and is one of the Sennenshi as well.

At the same time, he has been the best friend of Sheltis for the past ten years, and even more so his rival and enemy.

..... Ugh.

Sheltis took a glance at the electronic clock which is embedded in the wall.

"It's just four-thirty, you know?"

"It's 'already' four-thirty. Just in time for morning practice."

Leon nodded calmly.

"Really? See you then, I'll continue with my sleep....."

He planned to lay back down on his bed.

"You are coming too, Sheltis."

"W..... Wait, don't pull my arm!"

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Sheltis quickly shook off Leon's arms as he grabbed onto his wrists.

That's right. That young man is not only the strongest swordsman of the floating continent, he is also the craziest training fanatic.

He will shut himself in his private training floor to carry out the special training for his swordplay when he is free. He is known as a weirdo who enjoys training himself, more than his three meals a day. No, it would be alright if that was all there was to it. The problem is, as part of his training, he will definitely get me to be his spar—

"Hmm? What's wrong with you?"

"What else..... I spent the whole night sweeping, and I don't even have the time to shut my eyes even once."

"There may be the need for us to stay awake for three whole days during our missions."

"That's another case altogether if we were talking about that. Moreover, I have to attend the enrollment ceremony later at nine."

He directed his gaze at the schedule on the table, but Leon gave an expression that said 'I don't give a damn'.

"You just have to show your face and take a commemorative photo. No matter how tired you are, I don't think there is a problem as long as you have the strength to crawl to the gathering place."

"It's a photo-taking session, so is there a need for me to get all dirty?"

"Listen up, Sheltis. Calm down and think about the situation you are in."

Leon released his arms, and pointed at Sheltis.

"Even though you have finally returned to the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, you are starting anew as a cadet guard. Since you've been living in the living sector for the past two years, your skills haven't returned to their prime. Under such conditions, how long do you think it will take for you to become the Sennenshi of Ymy?"

"Uh.....?"

"Arara, Leon has hit the spot that hurts most."

The *crystal machine* <*Iris*> gave a snicker, in agreement with what Leon said.

"B-But..... Ymy said she would be waiting for me!"

Ymy— prior to entering *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, she was his childhood friend.

About ten years ago, she entered *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> as an apprentice-Priestess. After going through countless training and trials, she has finally become one of the five Priestesses of this world.

The reason for Sheltis's return to *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, is because of the promise he made to her back then, that he will be her exclusive guardian, her Sennenshi.

"How very naive. There's no guarantee that Ymy will have the luxury of waiting for you forever. This is especially true due to the incident not too long ago, where Hyouketsu Kyoukai was breached. Since then, there have been calls that 'a Sennenshi must be assigned to each and every Priestesses'. Even if Ymy has no intention of choosing anyone else other than you, there is no guarantee that she won't succumb to those demands because of the pressure."

"I..... am well aware of that."

The final decision of the candidate of the Sennenshi still lies within the hands of the Priestesses. Due to that right, Ymy has not picked her Sennenshi till now..... However, there are already many within *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> who are feeling uneasy in regards to the fact that Ymy has not chosen her Sennenshi after such a long time.

"I'm not wrong, am I? If so, the first thing that you have to do is regain your physical ability and swordsmanship from the past. How else are you going to be a guardian of the Priestesses?"

"..... Leon, I never expected you to be that concerned about me."

"You've only realized it now? That's right, the reason for me making you train with me is because I am concerned about you."

"I understand, Leon. I was wrong this whole time!"

Even though he was his rival in swordsmanship this whole time, Sheltis was deeply touched by the concerns that Leon had for him, although Leon was not very good at expressing them.

"I used to think that the reason you took me to take part in your training was because you wanted to have a sparring partner. But that was not the case!"

"Yes. You have finally appreciated my actions."

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Leon gave a nod of satisfaction, and a manly smile appeared on his face.

"Of course. That is my true intention, but how can I possibly say it out loud..... Oops."

"As expected, you've revealed your true colors!"

"Urm..... that's not important. In any case, let us move quickly. There is no one else like you whom I can test my skills on with my sword. It's really boring."

"You are graciously admitting to it after being exposed!?"

"Shut up, be quiet. You are bothering the rest of the cadets."

"Let— me— go——— Uwaaaa.....!"

Leon grabbed onto Sheltis' neck, and dragged him into the dark passageway.

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Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, paved roads—

Sheltis sprinted through the neat turfs of grass, and yelled,

"Ahhhhh, I can't make it, I'm gonna be late!"

"Sheltis, you have three minutes till nine o'clock."

"Leon that bastard—!"

They originally agreed on just training on their swordplay for morning practice, but it somehow escalated into full-fledged mock combat. Their fight got more and more intense, and before he knew it, it was about time for the enrollment ceremony.

Just then—

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"There's a shortcut over here."

Came the familiar voice of a girl. He turned his head—

A girl with light golden hair was standing there in a pure white vestment. She had a pair of jade colored eyes, along with a cute face. Her overall appearance is a fine balance between prettiness and cuteness.

"Morning, Sheltis. You just enrolled in today, and you're going to be late for the ceremony already?"

She raised her slender shoulders, and gave a snicker.

Ymy Ele Soufflenictole - one of the five Priestesses who maintains the protective barrier of the floating continent. At the same time, she was Sheltis' childhood friend and had lived with him, before moving into *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>.

"And what is with that embarrassing look of yours?"

Ymy walked towards Sheltis, and her sight was fixed onto him the whole time.

"Your clothes are creased, and your face is full of dirt. This will not do, you know. They are taking a commemorative photo today, so you will have to dress yourself properly as well."

"..... Well, me being late, my clothes being creased, my face filled with dirt; and not to mention, my severe lack of sleep - Leon is the cause of all these things."

"Ah, I saw Leon just not long ago. He was saying 'nothing beats a good work out' with a satisfied expression on his face, so I had a premonition then. So you were dragged to train with him?"

"..... That training fanatic."

I'll have to install a booby trap on my door next time, so as to prevent him from barging into my room. For example, rigging a bomb that would explode if he opens the door - things like that.

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"Speaking of which, why is Ymy here? It is extremely rare for a Priestess to come down from the top floors to the grounds of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>."

"Fufu, perhaps it is because we're both heading towards the same place."

Ymy nodded her head profoundly in response to the question raised by the *crystal machine* <*Iris*>.

"Meaning to say, Ymy is going to the training ground as well?"

"Mhmm. Today is the enrollment ceremony which is held once per month. As a Priestess, I will have to greet the people who will become guards in the future."

The speech made by the Priestesses is one of the events of the enrollment ceremony.

The Priestesses are the ones protecting the floating continent, while the guards are tasked with the job of protecting the Priestesses with their lives. Sheltis did remember the scene where the Priestess will address the newly-enrolled cadet guards with her speech.

"So let us head down to the training ground together."

"..... Is that fine? Won't people be suspicious of the fact that a Priestess and a cadet guard are walking together?"

"This is nothing. You worry too much. Moreover—"

Ymy walked to his side, and narrowed her eyes as though she was reminiscing something.

"I never had the chance to say this to you ever since you came back— Welcome back."

"..... Mmm."

I'm back — Sheltis somehow felt really embarrassed as he said that while looking at Ymy's face. He subconsciously shifted his sight away.

"It somehow feels..... like this is all a dream."

He mumbled, and lifted his head to look at the blue sky above him.

— I am actually back.

Together with that fact that I am walking together with Ymy, and talking to her like this. He never thought that such things would be possible, ever since he was expelled from *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> two years ago.

She is someone holding an absolute position - the position of a 'Priestess' - in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, while he is just a cadet guard who is starting from the lowest position there. Despite knowing the staggering difference in their status since two years ago - to be given the opportunity to be with her like the way they are now, he felt like he had regained the courage in his heart to carry on.

"You are exaggerating too much."

The Priestess gave a laugh.

"However, I have really been waiting for you all this time. Though you are starting all over as a cadet guard, I believe that you will definitely become an official guard someday."

I'll do my best. Sheltis nodded his head with force with that thought in his mind.

It was then when he suddenly noticed something, and he stared at Ymy's face.

"Ymy..... are those dark circles under your eyes?"

"Ah, is..... is it obvious? I've already asked for Meimel's assistance to cover it with the help of make-up, but....."

Ymy hurriedly covered her face with her hands.

"No, it's really well done. I just noticed it now."

The dark circles were small and not easily noticed. As her childhood friend, Sheltis could barely see it even at such a close distance, so perhaps it would go unnoticed at a further

distance.

"I had my barrier training yesterday, and it ended too late. When I was finally done with drafting my speech for later, it was already morning before I realized it..... Ehehe, I'm not really good with such things."

She gave a smile. However, there was an obvious hint of exhaustion beneath that smile of hers—

"You must be really busy, right?"

"It's the same for today's speech as well. You don't have to go if you are really busy. Things like giving speeches, a Priestess would only need to do it if they are free."

Ymy did not agree with the opinions of Sheltis and the *crystal machine* <Iris>.

"No, I am doing this willingly. Those who are becoming cadet guards are all part of the group of people that are protecting the Priestesses. The speech today is my chance to offer them my thanks."

..... Looking at the way Ymy is behaving now, she does really act like a Priestess.

One year ago - while he was still expelled from *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, and was living in the living sector.

Whenever there is an emergence of a new Priestess, the news will immediately spread to all corners of the floating continent. Sheltis heard about the news in the living sector as well, but he was feeling a sense of uneasiness along with the happiness in him. As her childhood friend, he knew Ymy's personality very well. She is no different from an ordinary girl, so is she really up to the task to be a Priestess that protects the whole floating continent?

Even after returning to the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, that feeling of uneasiness was still within Sheltis.

But having heard that from Ymy, he could clearly feel her consciousness and determination as a Priestess.

"You are quite the good example as a Priestess."

"Right? And also....."

The sincere look of hers changed. Ymy proclaimed strongly,

"Have a good look later, Sheltis. Ever since I became a Priestess, I've improved leaps and bounds in my abilities to deliver a speech!"

"Weird, I remember you being really shy back then, no?"

"No problem. I have nearly conquered that weakness of mine since I became a Priestess. Come, let us get moving."

As he looked at Ymy walking in confidence, Sheltis caught up to her side.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, outdoors training ground—

About twenty newly enrolled cadet guards had lined up properly.

"Urm..... urm..... therefore..... as one of the Priestesses, I am really happy that you guys..... no wait, I am really glad for everyone's enrollment into the palace! Ah, mmm, well then..... P-Please take care of your bodies, and continue doing your best!"

On the stage, was a Priestess that was making her speech with a blushing face.

"She's still the same as always."

"Yeah. After seeing Ymy being the girl whom I am familiar with, I feel strangely at ease."

She walked down the stage after she was done with her speech. A female instructor dressed in a dark blue suit went up to her.

"That's an impressive speech, Priestess Ymy."

"R-Really? Thank goodness!"

"Yes. You have improved by roughly forty percent, as compared to the one you gave previously. That..... the speech which was banned from being aired - that was quite honestly incomprehensible, but your performance this time is rather outstanding."

"T-that is just a slip of the tongue! How mean! Didn't we agree that we would no longer bring up that topic!"

Ymy tried to stop the instructor from continuing. The instructor just laughed while shaking her head.

"Ha ha ha, well, that is already a thing of the past."

..... Ymy, what exactly did you say during the last speech?

"Well then, I shall take my leave."

— Sheltis, do your best.

Ymy gave a mischievous smile, and left the place after winking at Sheltis.

In comparison.

"Alright, Priestess-sama is done with her speech. With that, the enrollment ceremony for today will come to an end."

The female instructor turned around with a dangerous smile on her face.

"I haven't introduced myself - my name's Yumelda, and I will be your instructor. Everyone's dismissed for the day. Starting tomorrow, I'll be drilling you all till you can't even stand. Be mentally prepared for that."

Despite being a female, her height is about the same as Sheltis'. She has a pair of long slender eyes and her jet black hair was trimmed neatly at the shoulders. In her mouth was a cigarette that was constantly giving off white smoke from its end. She is the instructor in charge of training the cadet guards, and is nicknamed the Devil Instructor, as she is famous for her

ruthless 'teachings'.

"So everything's over, and we can head back now?"

Sheltis heaved a sigh as he walked in between the group of cadet guards who were all heading back to *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

Though his dirty looks had invited strange looks around him during the photo-taking, he could finally be at ease for now. However, tomorrow marks the start of a series of tough training. He could tell from their faces, that the group of cadet guards that were returning to *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> were feeling nervous.

"Eh— it's already over? How boring. I thought you would take the opportunity to showcase yourself to others."

"You sure know how to talk, Miss Iris. I was raided by Leon after working through the night, and was forced to undergo nearly five hours of morning practice—"

— Who's that?

He suddenly stopped talking halfway, and turned around to face the stare that was coming from behind him.

"What's wrong, Sheltis?"

"Iris, do you know who that girl is? The one standing beneath the tree."

He signaled towards the direction with his eyes. Deep within the training ground, at about ten plus meters away from him, a girl was standing beneath a tree.

Her bright sakura-colored hair was bundled behind her back. Her age seemed to be roughly the same as his, though she may be one or two years older. Her mature temperament and the penetrating gaze of hers left a deep impression on him.

"What's wrong with the girl?"

"She has been staring at me since just now."

As for now, the girl acted as if nothing had happened, and was doing warm-ups by herself. However, she had indeed made eye contact with him before turning away. She was wearing the white ritual clothing of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. All he knew was that she's a cadet guard just like him, since he couldn't see the badge of an official guard on her shoulder.

"Hmm..... I don't think she is someone whom you know. From my data, there is no records of you seeing her before either."

"Really? Then forget it."

..... But, what's with that strange feeling?

The girl who was currently doing her warm-ups silently. However, there was a strange feeling that lingered in his mind, even though all he did was exchange eye contact with her - something felt out of place.

..... That dignified look of hers - had I seen her somewhere before?

"Just who exactly is she? I don't have the expression of talking to her face to face before."

"Maybe you had passed by her by coincidence somewhere in *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>?"

Right, he felt it was exactly like what the *crystal machine* <*Iris*> had said. However, he was still very concerned about her gaze earlier - perhaps it was due to them staring straight into each others' eyes.

"Hmm..... whatever, I'm not that worried about it. It's just—"

Sheltis stood in the middle of the training ground with a complicated feeling within him.

However, he had no chance to sort out his thoughts.

"Oi, how long are you gonna stand there for?"

A crisp sound of footsteps suddenly rang, along with the kicking of dust. He turned around,

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and saw that Instructor Yumelda was crossing her arms and standing right before him.

"I had already declared for you guys to be dismissed. For you to be ignoring my instruction by standing here motionlessly - does that mean that you're not planning to follow my orders?"

The female instructor tossed her smoking cigarette next to her feet, and extinguished it by stomping onto it with the tip of her shoes. On her face was a dangerous smile, akin to a carnivorous predator that had found its prey.

"Eh..... N-No..... How should I explain this?"

Sheltis took a step back, but the instructor advanced two steps forward.

"I see. So you are a lad that does not follow the orders of his instructor. Seems like I'll have to shower you with the love of my iron fists."

"W-Wait! L-Listen to me..... Whoa!"

Swash— A fist that was as sharp as blades grazed past his cheeks. Sheltis quickly dodged the attack by shifting sideways. His fringes were lightly swayed by the gush of wind generated by the punch.

"..... Ho? You can actually dodge my fist?"

"Eh? W-Well.....?"

"Ku ku ku. Not bad. Not bad at all."

He originally thought he would be chewed out by the instructor. However, the instructor showed a gleeful expression, and cracked her knuckles.

"It's been years since I've seen a cadet guard capable of dodging my fist. Seems like I've met a newcomer whom I can put in my effort into training."

"Huh?"

Before he could ask any questions, Sheltis was already being held by his neck.

..... Strange?

After thinking about it, something similar had happened just like this earlier this morning.
And the next thing that followed would be.....

"S-Sorry, but I was about to go rest for now."

"Follow me. From today onward, I'll be training you under a special regime designed by me.
Don't worry - you'll definitely become an official guard easily should you live through my training."

"S-Someone save me————!"

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, eleventh story - cadet guards dormitory—

"We're finally back."

"Yeah, I feel drained..... I want to take a shower right now."

Sheltis walked through the passageway, his body drenched with sweat and his body covered in dirt.

He was finally able to escape from the training of that Devil Instructor not too long ago.
Dinner time was long gone before he knew it, and most of the cadet guards were already preparing to sleep when he returned.

"Let's see, the third room after the junction..... Iris, this should be my room, right?"

He focused his eyes in the dark to look at the plate that says 'Sheltis Magna Yehle'.

"Right. Seems like you just can't remember where your room is."

"Since I had been living in the living sector for the past two years. This just somehow feels

unreal."

"Oh right, I do want to hear about your life there. What I knew was that you survived by working in a cafe, but I had no idea you were that friendly with two girls. Fufu, I really can't underestimate the Sheltis who is a play-boy."

"We do get along well with one another, but we're just friends."

"Ara, is that so?"

"Yup. As long as I'm not working, regardless of day or night, it will—"

"Ah, I've found Shel-nii!"

"Right right. It would be something like that— Eh?"

A sound came from near his legs.

As he was thinking that, a small petite body suddenly hugged his legs.

"Wa, it's really Shel-nii! Yuto misses you so!"

"..... Yuto?"

The person hugging him is a black haired girl around five or six years old. The look of curiosity from her amber colored eyes, as well as the way her hair was tied into twintails flowing behind her body, made her look really cute.

"Eh..... is that really you, Yuto?"

"Ehehe. Yuto's here, and Eyri-nee too. Hurry up Eyri-nee, I've found Shel-nii!"

The little girl hugged his legs tightly while shouting excitedly.

thud..... thud.....

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A figure appeared in the passageway along with the sounds of light footsteps.

"Oh, it's true. Long time no see, Sheltis!"

The girl in her oil-stained overalls waved her arms in his direction.

She looked like fifteen or sixteen. Despite that, her orange hair was rather messy, and she did not wear any makeup on her face. But somehow, all that suited her style better for some unknown reason.

"Even Eyriey too..... Why are you two here?"

"Eh? Do I even have to explain why?"

Eyriey — the girl in overalls ran towards him and patted the head of the little girl.

"It's obviously because we were feeling bored without Sheltis around. Right, Yuto?"

"Yup, Eyri-nee."

"..... Strange? Didn't I promise you guys that I'd find some time to visit you both at the living sector?"

Sheltis couldn't help but to give a wry smile upon seeing the relaxed looks on their faces.

"But it has been a few days since we last met, so I guess it can be counted as 'long time no see'."

He was forced to live as a commoner in the living sector for two years after being expelled from *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. Eyriey and Yuto are both girls whom he befriended during his time in the living sector. He knew Eyriey from his work at '*The Two Swans* <*Albireo*>'. As for Yuto, she got close to him and gradually loved to stick around him due to her frequent visits to '*The Two Swans* <*Albireo*>'.

Regardless, these two girls were his only few friends while he was in the living sector. As he was unwilling to break off from them just like that, on the day he returned to *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, he promised them that he would find a time to visit them in the living sector soon.

"Shel-nii, come play with us! Yuto doesn't want to sleep till you have done so with me."

Yuto tugged the edge of his shirt coyly.

"I see. So that's the reason you girls came here..... But wait a second. How did you two get in here?"

As *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> is the signature building of the floating continent, it receives a huge number of tourists from the living sector daily. However, the floor which they were on is specially reserved for guards like Sheltis, and is not opened to the public. The public elevators will not stop on this floor either.

"Fu fu fu, feast your eyes on this. Tada—!"

Eyriey fumbled around her chest, and pulled out a silver colored metallic card. Embedded on its edge, is a gold colored electronic key.

"Eh? That's the official badge of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>? Eyriey got into *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> as well?"

As suggested by her oil-stained overalls, Eyriey's interest is in researching machines. Her knowledge in that field is already past the boundaries of those of a mere hobbyist - building an adult-sized robot from scratch was child's play to her, and she even hacked into the main computers of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> with a computer she made herself. As a machine technician, she is probably the talent that *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> is desperately looking for.

"Eyriey, how did you get that badge.....?"

However, she replied with her usual relaxed voice of hers,

"Actually, Yuto found this on the side of the road."

"Yuto's great, right?"

"This is undoubtedly a misuse of lost items! Return it to the owner quickly!"

How should I put it? It really fits their style.

"Well— But Yuto has forgotten where she picked it up."

"..... I am already lacking sleep, and right now, my head's starting to hurt too."

That was a typical example of the misuse of a lost badge. Then again, he was probably the only victim under that sort of misuse.

"No worries. Let's take this opportunity to play. We've been waiting for you."

"..... even so, I'm really tired right now."

"But Ymy is waiting for you too."

"Eh?"

"Ah, hold on. I've just received a telepathy message..... It's from Ymy— Ah, hello? Yup. Mmm, Sheltis just returned. Right, then let's meet at the conference room on the two hundred and sixty-first story..... Eh, Ymy's coming here..... Mmm, there's totally no one in the passageway at night, aside from of us. Right then, we'll be waiting."

Eyrie looked into the ceiling and nodded her head constantly.

"So Ymy wants to come here by herself. Well, there's not many people at this time, so it should be fine for a Priestess to come down to the bottom floors."

"..... What's with this? The Ymy you are referring to is Priestess Ymy?"

"Yeah— she is Sheltis' childhood friend, right?"

"So she is..... Strange, how did you get to know Ymy?"

Eyrie lives in the living sector, while Ymy lives in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. There should be no point of connection between the two of them.

"I just met her today. Ah, here she is."

Eyrie pointed to the special elevator that connects the lower floors to the upper floors. The lights above the door were flashing, signalling that the door was about to open.

"Sorry for making you wait, Eyrie. Thanks for informing me."

Beneath the lights of the elevator, stood a girl who was wearing a pure white vestment.

She carefully surveyed the surroundings. Only after confirming that there was no one else around, did she smile and wave her hands at them.

"No problem. Speaking of which, telepathy is quite a convenient thing. Will I be able to use it if I practice hard on it?"

"Well..... I guess you may be able to do so if you persist with all the training while crying your eyes off for eight whole years?"

"..... I'll just stick to handphones."

Eyrie cringed. Upon seeing that, Ymy gave a pleasant wry smile.

— Strange? Why is this happening?

Sheltis looked at their interaction with surprise.

His childhood friend Ymy, together with Eyrie whom he got to know during his time at the living sector. Those two girls had somehow become rather close, as though they had been friends for years.

"Ah..... well....."

"Ehehe, surprised? I am already friends with Eyrie and Yuto."

Ymy said that shyly, as she hugged Yuto who had pounced into her.

"Friends?"

"Sheltis said before that he would introduce me to Priestess-sama, right?"

Eyriey was the one to answer him. The *crystal machine* <Iris> then followed closely behind,

"Back when Hyouketsu Kyoukai was breached, you rushed down from the living sector to *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> on the electric vehicle driven by Eyriey. As a token of appreciation, you said that you would introduce Ymy to her, so that they can be friends. Isn't that right, Sheltis?"

"Ah, now that you mention it....."

All the Priestesses, including Ymy, have few chances of making friends with people their age. The biggest reason is because typical people will be overly timid and respectful when they see the Priestesses. However, if it is the candid Eyriey, then perhaps she would be able to treat Ymy normally. I hope you can become friends with Ymy— he had indeed made that request to Eyriey before.

"Yup yup. This afternoon, we were on this floor looking for Sheltis, and by coincidence, Ymy was heading over via the elevator as well. Isn't that right, Ymy?"

"Yes, I was addressing the cadet guards in the morning. As I was making my speech from the stage back then, I had planned to greet them face to face, one at a time. And thus, I met Eyriey and Yuto when I got here. Since she saw me, Eyriey shouted, 'Ah, it's Priestess-sama! Have you heard from Sheltis? My name's Eyriey, can we be friends?' To be honest, I was quite surprised back then."

Ymy gave a slight giggle, perhaps due to her reminiscing the scene back then.

After hearing Ymy recount their story, Eyriey heartily gave a pat on the Priestess' shoulder.

"Sorry! I thought Sheltis had already told you about us. Though she had no idea what was going on in the beginning, we finally smoothed things out after I mentioned Sheltis' name and explained everything to her."

— So that's how it is.

Before he could introduce them to each other, the two girls had already become friends.

"Right, they seem to have used some interesting fabric for the vestments of the Priestesses. What does it feel like when wearing it?"

"Mmm— it feels really uncomfortable in the beginning, but that differs from person to person. Is Eyriey interested in trying it?"

"Eh? Can I really?"

"Mmm. Come to my room next time. You can try it anytime."

Eyriey was touching Ymy's vestment enthusiastically, while Ymy was looking at Eyriey's overalls with a curious gaze - upon witnessing that scene, Sheltis was temporarily relieved.



"Isn't that great, Sheltis. Rather than introducing them to each other deliberately, it may actually be much better for them to meet like this and let them get along with each other naturally."

"Mmm."

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..... It's really great that they can get along so well with each other.

"Oh right. It's already this late, so why did Ymy make the trip here?"

"Ah..... Well, Sheltis has successfully completed the enrollment ceremony, right?"

Ymy stood up while hugging Yuto in her arms.

"This may just be me meddling too much, but I had just finished chatting with Leon, and there was something he said that I am quite concerned with. Therefore, I wished to tell you about it as quickly as possible."

"Leon?"

"Mhmm. He said..... 'While he's with the other cadet guards, Sheltis will have to be aware of the position he's in. Otherwise, he may be ostracized'."

— My position? Ostracized?

What does he mean?

"I am not too sure..... In any case, he said things like 'he'll be facing all sorts of troubles should he act like how he used to in the past', and that made me worry quite a bit."

..... So Leon had actually said things like that.

That man has never told any lies nor has he cracked a single joke before. That's probably what he really believes, and is quite certain it'll happen. Therefore, he told Ymy about it.

"Ah..... Sorry, seems like I have caused you to become uneasy."

Ymy hurriedly shook her head when she interpreted his silence as a display of his uneasiness.

"Don't worry, I am fine. Thanks for coming all the way here to inform me about it."

"Mmm. What I said may be confusing, so you can try asking Leon himself if you want to know more about it."

Ymy placed Yuto back down on the floor, and took a deep breathe.

"Ah, Ymy-nee is going back? Bye bye—"

"See you two again, Yuto and Eyriey. If it is convenient for you both, please come visit me in

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my room at the two hundred and eighty-seventh floor. I'll inform security beforehand so you don't trigger the security system by accident."

"Ohhh— Really? I'll definitely go!"

"Mmm, I'll be waiting."

After turning her head to wave goodbye, Ymy walked back to the elevator.

The automatic door closed quietly. Eyriey stared at the elevator as the orange lights lit up, which signaled that the elevator was going upwards, then she suddenly mumbled,

"I originally thought that the Priestesses were out of our reach."

"Mmm?"

"Then I realized that Ymy really is Sheltis' childhood friend. After the conversations we had, it felt like she was just an ordinary girl. Ah, I'm actually praising her."

"So you can be Ymy's friend?"

Eyriey raised one of her arms happily upon hearing that question,

"Of course! Or rather, we are already friends. Isn't that right, Yuto..... Eh?"

"..... Eyri-nee, Yuto can barely open her eyes."

Yuto leaned herself on Eyriey's body, and rubbed her nearly closed eyes.

"Arara, could it be that you relaxed yourself too much after finding Sheltis? Can't be helped, we'll be heading back then. Oh right, there should be a resting room on this floor, right?"

"There is, but it can only be used by the guards of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>."

Having heard that, Eyriey took out a badge from her chest.

"Fufu, there's no problem with this around."

"..... The person who lost it must be worried sick. Go and make a lost-and-found report tomorrow."

"Alright. Well then, seeya tomorrow."

"Mmm."

Sheltis looked on as Yuto and Eyriey waved goodbye to him, then he too returned the gesture.

— It was something so typical, but somehow it felt so nostalgic to him.

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The turfs were wet with morning dew and were gently giving off a comfortable fragrance of the grass.

The skies of dawn was gradually turning from red to white, and then to the color of deep blue. And on the grounds that were reflecting the colors of the skies—

"Eh? I'm lost?"

In the middle of a huge clearing of the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, Sheltis looked around in a confused state.

"Strange, I remember that I took a left turn along this path yesterday."

"Shel-tis-? That's the reason I asked you to follow the directions stated in the electronic map."

"Ugh. I thought I didn't need to worry, since Iris is here."

Ymy guided him to a shortcut yesterday before the enrollment ceremony, and Sheltis tried to take the path today. However, he was lost before he knew it.

"So, in which direction should I be going?"

"Sorry. I was sleeping then, therefore I did not record the route you had taken."

"Machines need to sleep too?"

"Because, the lack of sleep is the biggest nemesis for a woman's skin."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> said with a sweet voice.

"The lack of sleep will actually affect the surface of an artificial crystal?"

"But of course. The lighting mechanisms of the crystal will be affected should my operating capabilities drop. As such, I'll conduct regular maintenance on myself to delete all unnecessary memories that are within me. That is my so called 'sleep', and it just so happens that it goes in line with the saying, 'beauty should start from within.'"

"..... Having heard your detailed and serious explanation, I really don't know how to reply to that."

What a headache. He could no longer remember the correct path due to that.

"I advise you to retrace your steps, and follow the correct route as shown on the digital map."

"Man, seems like that is my only option left."

He gave a shrug, and turned to face the direction he came from. Just then, he came into eye contact with the girl that was walking behind him.

"..... You are....."

Sheltis was rooted to the ground. His eyes widened.

"Yes?"

The first thing that came to his sight, was the bright sakura-colored hair.

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That hair was tied to the back in a ponytail, and was shimmering brilliantly under the rays of the sun. Her grey eyes were giving off a faint glow of blue. There was a mature air around her, and that was coupled with a calm voice and a sharp gaze.

— The girl who was staring at me yesterday?

"Ah..... Urm, well....."

Should I ask her about yesterday? Is it the right time to ask?

There was a chance that he may be misunderstanding things. Just as Sheltis was hesitating on how to raise the question, the girl raised her hand and pointed at the pathway,

"There is no need to go back. You can reach the training ground by going straight after the left turn along this path."

"Eh.....?"

"You must be lost, right? It is common for the new cadet guards."

And with that, she walked along the route she had just mentioned. As the sight of her back got smaller and smaller—

"..... She's gone."

Sheltis watched her go with a confused gaze.

Who exactly is she? Though she doesn't seem like a bad person.

Close to twenty cadet guards were standing in a line on the outdoor training grounds.

The cadet guards ranged from girls who weren't even fifteen, to guys who were past their thirties. Everyone was wearing the pure white ceremonial clothing that was assigned to them not long ago.

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Everyone was sweating buckets, as they bathed in the rays of the sun.

"..... There are generally four types of guards in the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. You guys are the cadet guards. The second group are the official guards of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, the regular guards that carry out missions to protect the Priestesses. The third group are the elite guards - the leader or cadres ranked guards in charge of managing the regular guards. Finally, the exclusive guardians of the Priestesses with the special rank - 'Sennenshi'."

The only person who had a relaxed expression on her face, was Instructor Yumelda from yesterday.

Despite wearing the same dark blue suit with a tie she had on yesterday, she didn't even break a sweat, even under the merciless sun.

"Therefore, your top priority should be to become a regular guard. Though of course..... should you continue to remain a cadet guard, you will still be assigned missions, but not those that involve protecting the Priestesses, which is the most important of them all. That would be quite pointless for you guys, right?"

She wrote that info on the whiteboard with smooth handwriting, only to erase all of it a few seconds later. That was perhaps so that the cadet guards would be forced to remember it all in their heads.

"Also, aside from the term 'guards', the term 'members' will sometimes be used as a form of address. If so—"

The female instructor was lecturing non-stop, while the cadet guards were standing motionlessly and listening to her attentively. In the corner of the group of people, *crystal machine* <*Iris*> spoke in a soft voice,

"Sheltis, do you need me to record this?"

"For the moment, no. I went through all of this three years ago."

He gave a slight shrug so as not to let the people around him notice. Just then—

"Oi, the newcomer from yesterday."

Without any warning, the instructor standing by the whiteboard suddenly pointed towards Sheltis' direction.

"Why don't you try explaining the difference between the two methods of addressing each other?"

"Eh..... Ehhh..... Who me?"

"Seems like she fancies you quite a bit."

Sheltis gave a flick at the snickering *crystal machine* <Iris> so as to make her shut up.

"..... I think the term 'members' includes the apprentice-Priestesses."

"That's right. When the term 'members' is used, it refers to the regular guards, the elite guards and the apprentice-Priestesses. The Sennenshi and the Priestesses are all of a special rank, so they do not fall under this rule. Oi, what's with that expression of yours, as if you were already done with all of these? Next question."

"Ehhh!?"

"The ranks of apprentice-Priestesses and cadet guards, have the terms 'apprentice' and 'cadet' in their respective name. Explain the difference between the two."

..... Let's see.

All he could depend on was the knowledge he learned three years ago, but he was not sure if it was still applicable now.

"Well..... the cadet guards are not official staff here, while the apprentice-Priestesses are ranked equally to the regular guards, which means they fall under the official staff as well..... something like that?"

"Ho? Looks like you've studied quite a bit on your basic knowledge before coming here."

Instructor Yumelda showed an intimidating and seemingly malicious smile.

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"All in all, you guys have to remember this! You are the cadet guards, or in other words, you all aren't even considered to be official members of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. And because of that, I'll be thoroughly training all of you starting today. Work on your physical strength for a year first. No one is allowed to touch their weapons prior to that!"

"One year!?"

"..... It's one year in theory, but that's still really long."

One year is wasted on physical training. And with the combat training that follows, heaven knows how long it will take before one can rise to the ranks of a regular guard. At the rate things are going, he may not even reach the ranks of a Sennenshi even after ten years.

..... I can't make Ymy wait for that long.

"Iris, do you have any good ideas?"

"As a cadet guard who has only been around for two days, it is best to assume that you have no right to speak. It will be safer to just go along with the flow for now. However, there may be a glimmer of good luck that appears in the midst of all these bad luck."

"Good luck?"

Sheltis was unsure of what the *crystal machine* <Iris> was trying to say.

For the past few days - especially after his enrollment into the team - was there any incident that could be considered as lucky?

"Oi, the newcomer over there. Come here for a while."

Instructor Yumelda's holler shattered that thought of his immediately.

"Seeing as you are extremely talented, I have already created a special training regime for you. You should be crying your eyes out and thanking me for my care and concern towards you."

"See? Here's your good luck."

Just as I had said — the *crystal machine* <Iris> said that triumphantly. Sheltis was too lazy to give a retort, and resorted to looking up at the sky.

"..... I know I'm not in the position to be complaining, but that's just way too 'lucky'."

A huge outdoor training ground where one can see the horizon. There's lots of different terrains within it.

Flat grasslands, a red wilderness filled with rubble, a hilly terrain, and even a torrential waterfall. All possible terrains in the floating continent had been faithfully replicated here via artificial means.

Za.....

The sound of shoes sinking into the compact sand reverberated in the sand dunes.

The grains of sand, which consists of some metallic elements, were reflecting off the rays of the sun that shone onto them. Due to the heat radiation coming from all directions, the surrounding temperature is kept at a steady rate of above forty degrees Celsius. Depending on the weather conditions, it is said that the temperature can hit above fifty in some cases.

An endless run around the man-made desert. That was the so called 'warm-up' as instructed by Yumelda.

"It's so hot! Sheltis, I am about to go black."

"Nothing's wrong with a little tan..... As for me, I don't think I can hold on much longer."

The temperature was constantly sapping away his bodily fluids, while the heavy sands were causing a drag in his steps. He had probably ran for around two hours under those conditions.

"Hoo, seems like you are finally getting tired."

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"..... Instructor Yumelda, can I ask something? Why do I have to carry Instructor on my back and run the full course, even though the terrain is already difficult to navigate as it is?"

Upon hearing the voice from his back, Sheltis asked the question without bothering to turn his head around.

"But it feels really enjoyable for me."

"That's not the case for me at all! How is this a 'warm-up!'?"



"Yeah, I've been waiting for you to say that."

A deep voice rang next to his ears.

"After an initial intensive and torturous training session on the very first day, it will be interesting to see how many people are able to hold on and continue with the morning practice on the second day. To be blunt, this is a sort of entry test created by yours truly."

"I see....."

She was creating a setback for everyone on the very first day, in order to test their mental strength to see if they can take it in stride. If they could not recover from the training, then they will not be able to endure the harsher training in the future. If that was the case, then it would be better to make them quit now, and walk another path instead.

That was her responsibility as the instructor of the cadet guards, and an act of goodwill as well.

"So you should burn away all your energy quickly, or else the test will not end."

"That's way too much!"

He re-positioned Yumelda on his back, and once again ran up the sand dune in front of him.

His views suddenly broadened. From above the sand dune, he could see the nostalgic greens of the turf.

"So are you done? Well, your body should be all warmed up with that, right?"

"It's not just warmed up. My body is totally burning....."

After placing the instructor down from his back, Sheltis wiped off the sweat on his neck.

"It's the same. Alright, continue your run till you have reached the initial gathering place. Speaking of which, since you are aspiring to be a guard, you should have learned some swordplay or martial arts before, right?"

The instructor crushed the empty cigarette box, then stuffed it into the pocket of her suit.

"..... Just a little in dual swords."

"I see. Well, the match-up is just about right."

He looked in the direction the instructor was pointing to - there was a young male swordsman, with a great sword in his hand.

He was wearing the ceremonial clothing of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. As there was no badge of the regular guards on it, he is most likely a cadet guard.

"That's a cadet who is in his third year. As of now, he has already learned just about all of the

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basics of swordplay. This may be demanding of you, but why don't you try pitting yourself against him."

A mock battle against Yuugenshu - regardless of whether you are a cadet guard, a regular guard or a cadres guard, all members of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> will have to go through the most basic training at least once a week.

The swordsman grabbed onto the sword which was about as tall as his height, and positioned it parallel against the ground.

— The tip of the sword was not even a millimeter away from the optimal position, which showcased the fine strength and balance the swordsman possessed. Just from that alone, one can see the impressive skills that the opponent has.

However, such a well trained swordsman is still not good enough to be a regular guard of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"Iris, please construct the blades of the swords."

After nodding his head at the *crystal machine* <Iris>, Sheltis drew out the blade-less hilts.

"Fixing a silver monad as the core. The blades will be constructed using high strength Elnie-silver alloy. In consideration that it will have to withstand the attacks of a great sword, the limit to destruction is set to be at eightfold — the settings for duelling against a human is complete."

Under the remote control of the *crystal machine* <Iris>, a pair of silver blades was constructed from the tip of the hilts.

Sheltis grabbed the brilliantly shining swords in reverse in each of his hands, and came face to face with the opponent swordsman.

One second..... Two.....

A minute had passed, and yet neither of them made their moves.

The representative great sword wielder no the continent is none other than Leon. That man is adept at working the length of the great sword to his advantage, and using it to launch a series of blazing attacks. However, the opponent before him did not even move an inch. Even though the both of them are great sword wielders, their temperaments are different. That is perhaps the most troublesome part about dueling.

Ka

From the tip of the swordsman's feet, came the faint sound of the pebbles shifting - here he comes!

"Ha—!"

He swung his great sword fiercely.

A silver flash of light cleaved through the air, and approached Sheltis with a piercing screech.

But before that, Sheltis had already made his move by pouncing towards the chest of the swordsman.

The opponent's expression changed as he realized that Sheltis had infiltrated his blind spot. He jumped backwards, but Sheltis pressed on by leaping forward.

Using the sword in his left hand, Sheltis gave a wicked strike at the opponent's right elbow. He then smashed the other sword into the left shoulder of the opponent.

The exchange lasted for only a few seconds.

Klang

With his right elbow and left shoulder struck by the swords, the swordsman lost his grip. The great sword slipped from his hands and fell to the ground.

"This ends here - seems like I've said too much."

An all serious Instructor Yumelda puffed out a cloud of white smoke from her mouth that was chewing onto a stick of cigarette.

"Hmm. Using the pebbles beneath the feet of your opponent to determine the shift in their center of gravity, and then leaping towards them without any hesitation..... It is a very risky way of combat, but your body possess enough techniques to carry out the action nicely. You may look clueless, but your judgement and decision-making isn't too shabby."

"That's right. Sheltis uses the clueless and cute face of his to make his opponents lower their guard against him."

"How very true."

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"..... Urm, what are you both talking about?"

"Nothing. Newcomer, pass me your badge."

Instructor Yumelda suddenly beckoned him with her arms.

"Eh?"

"What are you waiting for? Hurry."

"Haa....."

After handing over his silver badge to her, Yumelda stared at it with a gaze as if she was burning a hole through it.

"Hmm. Sheltis huh? I remember there was a dual sword wielder with the exact same name a few years back."

That sentence caused Sheltis' back to be filled with a cold sweat.

"I-Is that so?"

"..... Well, whatever."

As she gave a profound smile, she dug out her own badge from the chest pocket of her dark blue suit, and pressed the two chips in the middle of each badge together.

—Acknowledged—

"Here, don't go losing it."

The instructor tossed the badge high up into the sky. Sheltis caught it hurriedly. He then realized that his name on the badge was now showing a color of red instead of the original blue.

"With that, it is confirmed that Sheltis is promoted from cadet guard - first grade to cadet guard - second grade. From tomorrow onward, you'll be able to apply to the 'Merit System'."

"Merit System?"

He never came across that term three years ago.

"You'll know after a brief check by yourself. Just focus your attention on the training..... is

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what I would love to say, but according to the rules, you'll get to enjoy a thirty minute break."

"Eh? W-Wait a second....."

"I'll be off to buy some cigarettes. Should you have any question, save them for after the break."

Instructor Yumelda waved her arm casually in the air without even turning back. For quite a while, Sheltis stared at her as she slowly disappeared from his sight—

"As for the Merit System, I guess we'll just have to inquire on it later."

"..... I guess. Let's grab a drink."

Sheltis turned away from the instructor, and walked towards the water cooler. Having been forced to sprint around the man-made desert for a few hours since the early morning, his throat was already parched.

"Sheltis, continue walking while listening to what I have to say. I think you should have realized already."

"Mmm."

He gave a nod at the *crystal machine* <Iris>, who was talking to him in a low volume.

"There are people watching us."

He could feel the stares from his back, and it came from many people. Despite not knowing the exact figures, he could feel that the stares were especially intense during his mock battle against the great sword wielder.

"There's no point thinking about it for now. Here, this is the water cooler that you have been waiting for. A gentle reminder, do not ever let the water come into contact with the *crystal machine* <me>."

"Alright— Ah, the icy-cold water feels really comfortable."

"H-Hey! I just said it not too long ago, and here you are, makings things all wet already!"

"Ah, sorry."

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He shielded the water spray, and soaked his burning palms and face in the cold waters.

..... What's happening? I can't seem to calm down for some reason.

Sheltis stared blankly at the water that was flowing through his palms.

The cold water was slowly removing the excess heat away from his body. Even then, there was a sense of irritation that continued to linger within his heart.

It was due to the countless stares from all around him just now.

The girl who was swinging her sword at the training ground; the gunner who was maintaining his pistols; the rest of the people who were resting under the tree. It felt as though everyone had their sight trained onto him.

Strictly speaking, those stares were not friendly at all. Rather, it was as if they were evaluating something.

"It's not just you."

— A voice came from the water spray next to him.

"All new cadet guards will be subjected to similar appraisal. This is to determine if they are worthy enough to be roped in."

The voice came from a girl with sakura-colored hair. She wrung the wet towel dry, and gently dabbed the sweat off her forehead. The sleeves of her ceremonial clothing was rolled upwards, revealing the porcelain white skin from within.

"You are the one from this morning.....?"

The cadet guard who stared at him during yesterday's enrollment ceremony, as well as pointing out the path for him this morning. He never thought that she would engage in a conversation with him by her own will.

"Thank you for pointing out the path this morning."

"It's nothing. I was just passing by."

Her voice was not cold, but it was not friendly either. It fits her stern disposition to the point where she could just stop a conversation abruptly with her tone.

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"Urm..... Can I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"What do you mean by 'rope in'?"

The girl was still wiping her sweat off with the towel, but her hands suddenly froze.

"..... Seems like the term I used is not that appropriate."

What seemed to be bitter and self-depreciating smile appeared on her face.

"Simply put, it is to try to talk the newcomers into joining their squads. As the results of the Merit System will determine if one gets to be promoted or not, it is a must for a squad to strengthen itself whenever possible."

Merit System. That term yet again. Since it was something that he had never heard of even after rising to the cadres rank, then it must be a new system that was implemented during the three years of his absence.

"Promotion..... In order to be promoted to a regular guard, doesn't one have to complete the missions given out by the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>? Either that, or it will be determined by the results of the simulated combat."

Having heard that question, the girl widened her eyes a little in surprise.

"I have no idea where you heard all those things from, but that's from the old outdated system of a few years ago. In recent years, the promotion system of the guards have undergone many changes."

"Iris, do you know about this?"

"I have just checked the statutes of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. There seems to be a new system for the promotion of the cadet guards to the regular guards. Firstly, the cadets will have to form a squad consisting of three to five members."

Perhaps she was directly referring to the information found online - there was not a single pause to the voice of the *crystal machine* <Iris>.

"After forming a squad, you execute missions. There are different bureaus in the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> - out of

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which, the more significant ones are the Law Enforcement Bureau, which is in charge of managing the guards, as well as the Environmental Bureau and the Mechanical Bureau, and so on. Each bureau will release missions that involve things like protecting VIPs, scouting dangerous and uncharted territories, or subjugating the dangerous creatures that appear near the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon> - the squads will then have to accept and complete the missions. After the completion of a mission, the squad will be rewarded with points as dictated by the Tower's Law, in accordance to the difficulty of the mission. Once the accumulated points have hit above a certain threshold, they will receive the rights to face the test to become a regular guard..... generally, that's about it."

In other words, it does not matter how skilled one is. He will not be able to become a guard if he does not accumulate enough points as required.

But why did they implement such a system?

"As for the fights against Yuugenshu, you can consider the hypothetical situation where the barrier of the Priestesses is breached yet again."

She placed the towel on her neck to cool herself down, and continued,

"When the Yuugenshu are attacking from the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, the most crucial factor is how the guards work as a team within their squads. Should anyone in the squad move by their own accord and cause the collapse of the line of defense, the floating continent may fall into a state of emergency."

"Then, this system is in place to force everyone to work on their teamwork?"

As the missions are assigned to squads and not individuals, the cadet guards will be able to improve on their teamwork, which will be essential in their future battles against the Yuugenshu. If they are not able to do so, then the missions will result in failure. And since they are not able to accumulate enough points, they will not receive the right to face the test and be promoted to the ranks of a regular guard.

"I see. They are not seeking for the highly-skilled, but instead, guards who can work together to fend off the Yuugenshu as a team - indeed, with such an impressive promoting system in place, *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> will be able to develop their required talent."

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"Even so, it is undeniable that this system has caused a situation of bottle-necking."

She lowered her voice, and gave a sigh that couldn't be heard by the people around her.

"Under this system, the cadet guards are given much freedom in the formation of their squads. Despite them restricting the members to be made up of cadet guards only, the squads can either change the number of members as they please, or settle on a core group of members. As far as the efficiency of the system goes....."

"It is still much better for the squad to settle on a group of core members. Since the members will be placing their lives in the hands of their teammates, it is much better to do so with a group of trustworthy teammates, rather than to work with a squad of members whose skills and personalities you are not familiar with."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> finished her sentence.

No matter who, everyone will be thinking the same thing.

"..... It's as she said."

Sheltis could remember what happened three years ago. Back then, he had always worked on missions together with Leon. It is of utmost importance to be able to entrust your back to your partner, and that is even more so in dangerous missions where you are putting your lives on the line.

"Because of that, the majority of the cadet guards have already formed tens of squads, and are actively seeking out new outstanding members to be roped into their own squads. That is the situation as of now."

The girl shifted her sight away from the splashing waters, and lifted her face.

"I get it..... So that's the reason why everyone has been staring at me with those evaluating gazes."

"But to look at it from another angle, you can treat it as if you have already gained everyone's attention."

Sheltis had no idea if the girl was joking or being serious - there was no emotion in her voice.

"Not long after your enrollment, you have already defeated a cadet guard in a duel, despite him being here for many years already. With such an outstanding performance, I think it will

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not be long before the emergence of squads that will be convincing you to join them. I advise you to carefully select members whom you think you can work with."

"Oh right....."

After a moment of hesitation, Sheltis finally called out to the girl, who had her back facing him. He did not know if it was appropriate for him to do so, but that was the only thing he wanted to know.

"You were staring at me during the enrollment ceremony. Is that a sort of evaluation from you as well?"

"How can that be?"

What answered him was a self-depreciating laugh.

"For a failure like me..... I am different from the likes of you. There is absolutely no squad that would invite me to join them. Needless to say, I don't even have the right to evaluate others."

With the towel in her hand, she walked towards the training grounds.

{4}

A clear, cloudless sphere of the skies in the dark night.

Tenketsu Palace <*Sophia*> was giving off a faint white glow in the dark. It extended up into the endless skies, as though it was trying to pierce through the heavens.

The material that the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> is constructed of absorbs the rays of light from the sun in the day, and releases them at night. From a distance, the whole tower looks like a pillar of light.

"There's totally no need for the lights, right? Though it would be slightly darker without them, it's not like it will cause an inconvenience for those walking by."

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"No matter how bright the glow from the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> is, it probably won't reach the outdoor training grounds."

Beneath the faintly glowing *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, Sheltis was walking on the paved roads in the night, while looking at his shadow that stretched out from beneath his feet.

"Hmm— a stroll at night is a really romantic thing. It's a pity that there is only a guy walking by his lonesome on this path - what a painful reality this is. Do you want to head back to the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> to invite Ymy out for a walk?"

The *crystal machine* <Iris> suddenly said those baffling words.

"I am just going for my night practice."

"Fufufu, even if the person is Ymy, she would definitely be wearing a thin piece of casual clothing at night as well. You wouldn't not know this, but Ymy's growth in the past two years is really impressive. What's more, she is still in the process of developing! Sheltis would probably faint on the spot if Ymy was to reveal just a bit of her skin."

..... Should Ymy hear those words, Iris would probably be crushed alive by her hands.

"Iris, could it be that you're really bored?"

"Ah, so you actually noticed? I was way too bored during the day, since most of my processing space was idle back then."

"..... I knew it."

A gust of wind that was carrying the remaining heat from the day breezed by Sheltis silently.

Pressing on to his jacket, Sheltis continued his walk on the turfs in the dark.

"Let's see. I should turn left here."

"Right. I've recorded it all down, so it will definitely be correct this time."

That was the shortcut shown to him by Ymy yesterday, and he was reminded of it again during the day. After walking straight through the grassy path that was not recorded in the digital map—

His view broadened instantly.

"..... Upon looking at it again, this place is indeed huge."

The outdoor training grounds.

The turfed areas only occupied about half of the whole area. The remaining area is made up of landscapes that are replicated in reference to those found on the floating continent, such as the sand dunes, the rocky areas, as well as the barren lands, and so on. There is no place to seek shelter should it rain - training will be converted to suit the wet conditions should that happen.

The training grounds extended endlessly into the darkness on the other side, where light cannot reach.

"Though it is only the cadet guards who will be using the outdoor training grounds, there is around nine hundred of them. I think such a huge place is necessary for everyone to train at the same time."

"Whoa, there's so many of us? I remembered there was only about eight hundred back when I was around."

The increase in the amount of guards is probably an indication that the threats posed by the invasion of the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> is becoming greater than ever.

"On the other hand, the strength of the regular guards have decreased to below three hundred. Don't forget, the competition for a spot among the regular guards is intense each and every year."

"..... I know that. That's the reason I came here tonight."

Most of the guards sleep and wake up early - which means they are living a typical healthy lifestyle. As such, when the clock hits five in the morning, the training grounds will be filled with cadets who are there for their morning practice. At night however, it is just like what he was seeing - the place was quite empty.

"The regime set by the Instructor is not intense enough?"

"No..... I just feel like swinging my swords, so as to get back my touch from three years ago."

Just as the instructor had said, they will probably be working on their basics for a year. If so, practice for his dual swords could only be done at night. It sucks for Leon to be hitting the nail on its head, but no matter what, he will have to rediscover the touch he had back in the old days.

"Iris, construct the blades."

"Switching to the anti-Yuugenshu settings. Fixing a silver monad as the core, and encasing its surrounding with a layer of azure crystals of Hyouketsu Kyoukai. Its limit to destruction is set to be at sevenfold."

A silver line began extending outwards from the blade-less hilt. Azure frozen crystals began to form over the line, and they gradually turned into the new blade of the sword - its the pair of swords that he is the most familiar and comfortable with.

..... Purple huh.....

Upon seeing the blades, Sheltis heaved a heavy sigh.

The azure crystals were giving off a brilliant glow at night. As they were absorbing the mateki from within his body, the blades were gradually dyed violet.

"Iris, it's still the same as before?"

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"..... Unfortunately, there is no change to the waves of the mateki you emit."

Mateki — a strange wave that is unique to Yuugenshu.

The powers of Yuugenshu called 'mateki' is now currently in the body of Sheltis. Or rather, it is more accurate to say that his body is being 'forcibly occupied by mateki'. The strange thing is that the mateki in Sheltis' body has absolutely no effect against ordinary humans. Only when it comes into contact with shinryoku as strong as those of a Priestess, will repulsion occur.

Due to that, Sheltis is unable to touch even the fingertips of Ymy till now.

"..... The mateki of *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> huh....."

Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> — a world of Yuugenshu sealed by Hyouketsu Kyoukai, ten thousand meters beneath the floating continent. Three years ago, Sheltis fell off from the floating continent and into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>. As a result, Sheltis was infected by the mateki from the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>. Till now, they have not discovered any method to cure him.

His greatest wish is to be able to purify the mateki that exists in his body.

However, it is equally important for him to be able to regain the skills he possessed as a guard back then.

"..... I'll have to focus on my training."

He calmed himself down, and directed his focus onto the tip of his blades.

—Swash!

He lifted the sword in his right hand, and stabbed it downwards into a puddle of water beneath his feet.

There was no signs of ripples on the surface of the water.

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What happened was, the blade had quietly pierced through the surface of the water. It did not tear through the surface roughly or cause a splash, but instead, it had just barely sliced through the surface tension and the molecules of the water surface.

However—

"Hmm? Why is the female instructor of the day standing there?"

After Iris had said that, there was an immediate tremble to the tip of the sword, resulting in a huge ring of ripples on the surface of the puddle.

"Sheltis, that will not do. You'll be creating ripples if your hand moves."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> gave a snicker.

"Ah..... Damn you Iris! I was finally able to concentrate, and yet you distracted me! How is it possible for Instructor to appear at a time like this!"

"Fufu, seems like it will be difficult for you to overcome your fear of the instructor within a short period of time."

"..... That's totally cheating."

He swung the sword to his side unhappily to fling away the water droplets on the blade.

"Oh right, since you are the only one here on the training ground, why don't you work on something that is more intense? Like cleaving the ground open with a single slash, or stirring up a tornado with a swing of your sword—"

"Iris, pipe down for a moment."

"Hmm?"

"Hush— be quiet!"

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Sheltis retracted the swords in his hands, and hid his presence within the shadows of the nearest tree.

— That is.....

Beneath the faint glow of the light, a bunch of long sakura-colored hair appeared faintly in the distance.

The cascading hair was tied into a ponytail behind her neck, and the girl with a stern disposition was walking towards their direction with firm and sturdy footsteps.

"Oh, she's the girl from this morning. It is rare for a cadet guard to be coming to the training grounds at a time like this."

"..... Mmm."

She walked past the tree without noticing their presence.

She was wearing the pure white ceremonial clothing during the day, but now, she had changed into a casual attire consisting of a white training shirt and a pair of dark blue shorts. In her hands were a pair of rods made of black metal. Their length were slightly shorter than that of his dual swords, and a unique hook extended from each of their sides.

"Jutte — so it's actually a pair of *crossed rods* <Rosario>. The black metal should be an alloy of chrome and ceramic. It's a very tough and light material, and its weakness towards heat is removed as well." [TLNote: [十手 \(Jutte\)](#), a Japanese weapon. As for the 十字毘 <ロザリオ> (*crossed rods* <Rosario>), it's probably referring to weapons that form a cross when the two rods/sticks/whatever crisscrossed with each other. The kanji + furigana combination is probably a term coined up by the author]

"That's quite a rare weapon that she's using."

As for its characteristics - the weapon itself is of a simple shape, so it is very easy to pick up. Moreover, as it is a branch of martial arts related to stick fighting, plus it can be dual wielded, the wielder can easily execute an impregnable defense. Striking weapons like swords, spears

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or staffs are naturally out of the question - even for an experience gunner, it would be difficult to break through the perfect defense of the *crossed rods* <Rosario> as well.

Despite all that, there are very few people in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> who choose that as their choice of weapons.

"..... Since its offense is horribly weak."

Sheltis set his sight onto the weapons in the girl's hands.

They have no blades, and their weight is not comparable to that of a typical staff. Those weaknesses may not be much of a problem in a typical duel. However, in the most crucial battles, which is those against the Yuugenshu, the weaknesses will put its user at a severe disadvantage.

"And now we shall see her skills."

Swoosh

With a piercing sound of the winds, the girl began to move. Under the glare of the lights, she executed horizontal cleaves, lashes and stabs with the *crossed rods* <Rosario> in her hands. There was no hesitation in her actions.

She made a jump, and sliced horizontally with the *crossed rod* <Rosario> in her left, and followed up quickly with a vertical slash using the *crossed rod* <Rosario> in her right.

She manipulated the shiny black weapons nimbly, and it looked as though she was dancing.

"That's quite beautiful."

"Ah, Sheltis is all mesmerized."

No, that's not it — he shook his head silently.

"What I mean is, her actions are too perfect."

He carefully shifted his position in the shadows, and moved to a spot where he could see the

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girl clearly.

..... Just as I thought.

After his reassessment of her movements, Sheltis knitted his brows.

Her movements were really well polished. However, it was almost like she was just replicating the moves as written in the *crossed rods* <Rosario> manuals faithfully.

It does not matter if she is fighting against humans, beasts or even the Yuugenshu. She is far from capable of landing her hits on the opponents with those moves of hers. She can block the attacks of her opponents, but that is a far cry from being able to defeat them.

And that was the problem she was facing.

A pair of *crossed rods* <Rosario> which lacked offensive power, and her movements that were too faithful to those taught by the manuals. Either one of the two problems are enough to cause her not to be able to defeat the Yuugenshu. She should be well aware of those problems as well.

..... Hmm?

As he watched on, the girl suddenly stopped in her tracks. She slammed the bottom of the *crossed rod* <Rosario> in her left hand to that of the *crossed rod* <Rosario> in her right, and began to twist it.

Klang— the two *crossed rods* <Rosario> combined together with a clear ringing sound.

"Ehh. So she actually combined the two shorter *crossed rods* <Rosario> into a long staff. Is such a thing possible?"

"It's probably modified."

But what was the reason for that?

Its overall length may be longer than that of a great sword, but that was nothing more than the simple action of combination, and its overall toughness will still be very fragile. Should she

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use that as a long staff, it will cause more trouble than its worth.

"..... Fu."

He had no way of understanding her actions.

The girl took a breath of air, and lifted the combined long staff.

In the next instant—

Sia Sec elis arc..... Is io Miel

<I hope to dream once again, the dreams of that day.....>

The words of power began to weave from her mouth into a smooth uninterrupted flow.

..... That is?

"The opening prologue of shinryoku?"

Shinryoku — they are known as waves that are in anti-phase with mateki, a mysterious power that can produce miracles. However, learning how to control it is no easy task, and it is said that one will have to undergo a long period of training in a special organization in *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> before they can use it.

But why was such a form of shinryoku appearing from her?

"— Prayers, are just an illusion.

The objects of desire, at a place out of reach.

Reality, exceeds all reasoning.

Thoughts, forgetting everything.

....."

The waves of shinryoku overlapped with the chants of the girl. The miracle that permeates the world began to show its presence.

"Oh blessed metals..... the Third Stone..... Descend, the crystals of white silver!"

As though it was proving the truth to what Sheltis was seeing, faint snow-white particles of light began to glow all around the girl's body. The radiance flowed through her arms, and gradually gathered on the black metal staff.

"Under the guidance of the Priestess..... the twenty-second power of the second process shall form the world."

In the blink of an eye, the originally transparent and gentle white glow collected itself onto the staff, and they began to crystallize.

The lights of shinryoku turned into a brilliantly shining crystal at the tip of the staff - the staff looked like a spear with a white silver blade on its end.

"That is the materialization of shinryoku, that belongs to the advent-type spells. I see, so the reason for her choosing the offensively lacking *crossed rods* <Rosario>, is because she can enhance the powers of her weapon via the arts of shinryoku. By changing forms of the *crossed rods* <Rosario> to one that possesses shinryoku, she can weaken the mateki of the Yuugenshu. This is quite surprising."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> exclaimed in praise.

But then—

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"..... How is that possible?"

The scene of the girl had caused Sheltis to nearly forget to breathe.

There were two reasons for that. Firstly, the practitioners of shinryoku are extremely rare among the members of the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. All guards who are adept at shinryoku will be granted positions above the rank of a regular guard unconditionally. If so, why is this girl still ranked as a cadet guard even now?

And the other reason, which is perhaps the most shocking one out of the two—

"Iris, the activation arts which she just used is similar to that of a Priestess, right?"

"Yes. That includes the opening prologue, the prayers, the coefficient of the cycles and the manifestation. Despite the slight differences between the two arts, the procedures are similar in general."

The shinryoku-practitioner of the guards uses other techniques instead. For example, for simple things such as the enhancement of weapons via shinryoku or telekinesis, they can be activated through simpler procedures.

However, that is not the case for the activation arts of a Priestess. For a Priestess who exemplifies miracles and mysteriousness, her arts are especially complicated, and follows a strict ritual procedure.

That is especially so for the initial part.

The opening prologue sung using the Priestess-language is something incomprehensible to everyone else other than the Priestesses. If so, then this girl must have trained in the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> as an apprentice-Priestess before.

"Since she wished to become a member of the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, a typical person would have chosen to enroll into the tower as an apprentice-Priestess..... as the rank of an apprentice-Priestess is the same as that of a regular guard, no? Then why is she lowering her own rank to be a cadet guard?"

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"If necessary, I can check on her past. Do you need me to obtain her records from the main computers of the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>?"

"..... No, that's not necessary."

Sheltis gave a vague reply to the question of the *crystal machine* <*Iris*>. He was indeed curious, but that is the girl's personal problems, and he was in no position to step in.

"Why don't you ask her directly then? There is no one else around if you are to approach her now."

"I'll leave it for next time. It's about time I focus on my own practice as well."

As he put on a small smile on his face, Sheltis grabbed his dual swords and made a turn. He slowly walked away from the girl in silent strides.

"Eh? You seem to be rather happy."

"Mmm."

There was only one thing which he was certain of.

It was not the fact that she is a shinryoku-practitioner, nor was it the fact that she may have underwent the training of a Priestess - but something simpler, something that is more important—

"So Leon and I aren't the only freaks who come here by our own accord to train."

Sheltis gave a chuckle in his mind. He then lifted his head to look at the night skies.

"I think she must be someone who works really hard. Don't you think so, Iris?"

"..... I do. But to be that happy just because you've found another person who is similar to you - you really are simple."

Chapter 2: Isolation

{1}

"It's morning already."

"Heh?"

"Sheltis, stop sleeping already. I'll blast your eardrums with loud soundwaves if you don't wake up right now."

"Don't go about scaring me this early in the morning....."

Rubbing his tired eyelids, Sheltis got off his bed slowly.

He navigated through the dark room based only on the blurred images captured by his eyes. He reached his hands out towards the draped curtains.

"..... What, it's still dark out there."

"It's already five. You're the one who said you wanted to do the morning practice, right? Are you still tired from your practice yesterday that went late into the night?"

"..... I'll do my best."

"If you really can't take it, you can continue sleeping, you know? I'll wake you up again when it's time for you to attend the morning gathering at nine."

"I..... I will not succumb to your temptations!"

"Fufu, that uptight expression of yours is really cute."

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..... She's teasing me again.

Ignoring the *crystal machine* <Iris> who was flashing about happily, Sheltis grabbed a white shirt and a short black jacket from his wardrobe.

"Speaking of which, Sheltis' black jacket looks very similar to the old ceremonial clothing of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>."

"It's not 'similar', it is indeed the old ceremonial clothing. I re-tailored the clothing that I wore three years ago and made it into a jacket."

Leon's long coat is the pristine example of the newest line of white ceremonial clothing used across the board. It is because it contrasts well with the dark purples of the mateki of Yuugenshu, making it easy to spot an infected ally.

And as of now, Sheltis was the only person who was still wearing a black jacket.

"Won't you receive a warning for not wearing the white ceremonial clothing?"

"Since the cadet-guards aren't official members yet, the most I'll get is some advice to do so. Of course, it would be better if I change into the official ceremonial clothing."

It is recommended for the cadet-guards to wear the white ceremonial clothing, but it isn't compulsory. The reason is that cadet-guards will not be dispatched to missions where they are required to fight against the Yuugenshu.

"But since everyone else is wearing white, wouldn't it be better if you follow suit? Especially because you just entered the palace not too long ago."

"It would be bad if I wore white clothing. I could be easily spotted should I come into contact with mateki while wearing a set of white clothes. And if anyone caught sight of that—"

After falling into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, Sheltis' body had been infected by powerful mateki.

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In exchange for the price of purging the shinryoku from his body, he had obtained the ability to nullify the mateki of Yuugenshu with his own mateki.

"Ah, I see. A typical guard would be in danger should he come into contact with mateki, but Sheltis would be fine. If you are shown to be alright despite coming into contact with mateki, you would only be inviting the suspicions of the people around you. It will be much more convenient for you to claim that you have not come into contact with mateki by wearing that black jacket, which is of a similar color to that."

"..... Mmm, though that is quite a masochistic reason."

He was the only one wearing black among the pure white clothing. That was obviously asking for attention, and him attracting the curious gazes from everyone around him was something to be expected as well. The truth is the cadet-guards were all trying to get away from him during the photo-shooting conducted the day before yesterday.

"Somehow..... while the term 'isolation' is a little too exaggerated, the only thing that I can do now is accept my current predicament."

"Yes. You will also have to take note of any people who knew you three years ago. The elite guards back then, which were the leaders or cadres ranked guards. Most of them are still currently serving as guards."

Prior to his fall into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, the cadres ranked Sheltis had teamed up with many of the guards before. Should they meet again, there will be a high chance that they will recognize him.

"Even so, you can still relax while you are a cadet-guard, since it is rare for the cadet-guards to team up with the regular guards, and there's also the fact that guards with rankings of official guards and above will all be training inside the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>."

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"..... I can never be too careful."

The incident of him falling into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, the mateki in his body, as well as him reentering the palace after a lapse of three years.

None of the above matters can be revealed to anyone. The only people who know about those things are the few people in the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> whom he is familiar with, such as Ymy and Leon.

"Mhmm. Let us get back to our original topic then. That black jacket does indeed suit you really well. I have zero desire in seeing Sheltis being all prim and proper in his clean white ceremonial clothing."

"That last part was unnecessary."

After putting on the chain with the *crystal machine* <Iris> hanging from it, everything was in place.

"Right, there's no point in us continuing with our conversation. Let's head out for morning practice."

"What about breakfast?"

"There's a canteen located at the outdoor training grounds. I used to eat there all the time."

After confirming that the automatic door was securely locked, Sheltis left his room.

The passageway in the early morning was still dark.

He walked through the spacious passageway, then made a turn at the junction to head towards the central elevator.

— However.

Right after he made the turn at the junction, he could hear the shuffling of feet and the bustle of many people before him.

"Strange, did something happen?"

About ten people had gathered around the elevator, and they all seemed to be cadet-guards who were wearing the whole set of the white ceremonial clothing. Upon taking a closer look, he realized that everyone was holding onto some colored cards.

At the ends of the queues, were a few desks and chairs placed together. The receptionists at the desks were all cadet-guards as well.

"What are they applying for?"

"No idea. Want to take a look?"

He made a detour to an area with less people, and peered into the crowd—

"Here— everyone, queue up properly! We will be distributing the recruitment cards to everyone now! The squad's name achievements are printed on the front, while the application form is located on the back. Please hand it over to the counter at the Law Enforcement Bureau when you are done signing it!"

"Ah, the girl walking over there. You should be a new cadet-guard who just joined us yesterday, right? Come, here's the recruitment card for our squad. We're all girls, so there will be less pressure on you if you join us. We usually hang out at sector eight of the outdoor training grounds, so please come over and take a look if you're interested!"

Before him were cadet-guards who were planning to head for their morning practices, as well as cadet-guards who were stopping them.

Next to the elevator and behind the desks, were the recruiters. The line of people gathered before the desks were the newcomers who took the commemorative photo with Sheltis the day before yesterday.

"A lobby?"

"Hard to say. From how they are distributing the recruitment cards to the nearby cadet-guards, I think it is more

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appropriate for you to say they are promoting or advertising themselves, rather than 'lobbying'."

"I'm getting more confused by the minute. I guess I'll understand when I get my hands on one of the cards?"

Just as he and the irregularly flashing Iris were feeling all clueless—

"Weird, so Sheltis doesn't know anything about it? They're explaining how to join a squad."

"Eh?"

A girl with orange hair in overalls, and a little girl with black hair and an innocent smile suddenly walked out of the crowd.

"Good morning, Shell-nii—"

"Morning, Sheltis. The cards will be gone if you don't join the queue quickly."

"..... Eyriey and Yuto, what are you two doing here?"

The two who were walking away from the crowd had already amassed more than ten cards of various colors in their hands.

"Didn't I just say it? Everyone's here to recruit new members for their squads, or to look for a recommendation into a squad. See, I've received so many cards too. The registration form is located at the back of the cards."

Eyriey fanned out the red, blue, green and yellow cards in her hands. The cards vary from hand-written ones, to the mass-printed ones - the differences were huge.

"It's like what the girl with the sakura-colored hair of yesterday had said. They are convincing the newcomers to join their squads."

..... So that's what's happening.

It had only been two days since the new batch of cadet-guards enrolled. Though it was just the

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distributing of the cards, he was still surprised at how quickly the squads had made their moves.

"Oh right, why are you here?"

"Mmm? Well— Yuto woke up really early, and she said she wanted to play. I brought her here with the plan of finding you in your room. However, I was greeted by many people the moment I stepped out of the elevator. I was all confused about the situation, and before I know it, I had already joined the queue unknowingly and took the cards. I found you after that - something like that? It's probably because I am treated as a cadet-guard, due to me wearing the lost badge which we found yesterday— see, just like that."

Eyriey was pointing to the passageway in front of the elevator, which was of some distance away from them.

Many of the senior cadet-guards had surrounded a group of newcomers, who were just about as clueless as Sheltis.

"Hi— morning. You must be the new member here? We'll be depending on you!"

"..... Huh?"

"The training results of yesterday! Your physical strength must be quite something for you to be able to keep up with Instructor Yumelda's training on the very first day. Please consider joining us."

"..... Ah, right....."

"Then we'll be waiting for the good news."

"Okay....."

The members were proactively approaching the group of clueless new cadet-guards and shaking their hands, before moving away to look for new targets. The cadet-guards were left standing motionlessly behind them, without any idea of what was going on around them.

"Well, something like that."

Eyriey smiled wryly as she shrugged.

"— Therefore, these are the various squads and their members, as well as a short speech..... or rather, reasons for joining their squads. I don't need any of these, so take them."

After spreading out the cards, she stuffed it all into Sheltis' hands.

"I have to look through every single one of them?"

"If you want to. Though most of them were written with things similar to 'please join our squad'."

"I knew it."

"And there's some rare classics in them, such as 'It was a heart-wrenching scene to see you guys being yelled at by the Instructor and running about on the training ground while desperately trying to hold your tears back. Our hearts ache for you as we remember that silhouette of your running bodies. Please join our squad!'..... Mmm, I highly recommend those."

"Wow, it's totally tailor-made for Sheltis."

"Why is Iris saying that too! And isn't it just weird? Everyone had indeed underwent the training yesterday while being brutally yelled at by Instructor, but I can't quite imagine any touching scenes to be seen from that?"

"Alright, the joke ends here. What are you planning to do?"

"Eyri-nee, Yuto's bored" — Yuto pouted unhappily with a bored expression on her face. Eyriey looked at Sheltis pleasantly as she patted Yuto's head.

"What do you mean?"

"Those guys over there thought I was a cadet-guard, so they told me quite a few things. As such, I have a rough idea about what the promotion system is all about. Under the current promotion system, you will not be able to accumulate points if you do not clear missions, but

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you can only take on missions as a squad with at least three members in it. If so, Sheltis will have to get into a squad to earn some points, right?"

"It is as you have said....."

"If so, it will be for the best if you take a look at all these cards."

She secured the thick stack of cards with a paperclip.

"Here. Well then - Yuto, let's go!"

"Right—"

The two held hands and were about to leave.

"Hold on, where are you two going? Didn't you guys come here to play?"

"You will just have to focus on reading the cards. We are heading to the aviation division of the Mechanical Bureau on the fifty-ninth story. Yuto told me there's something interesting going on over there."

The various bureaus of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, such as the Mechanical Bureau and the Tower Controls, are located along the thirty-eighth story to the two hundred and forty-first story of the tower. While it is not a restricted area, they aren't places where commoners like Eyriey would normally be interested in.

"..... I don't know what's so interesting, but don't go about causing problems for the staff there."

Right— the duo replied to him loudly, before running off together.

After watching the two disappear from his sight—

"Sorry, but there is something that I'd like to say."

The *crystal machine* <*Iris*> spoke with an unusually soft voice.

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"Something feels strange here. Even if the other cadet-guards are not queuing up, they will still be handed cards by the recruiters. We are the only ones who are not being approached by anyone."

"..... Mmm."

Sheltis realized that too.

He had the feeling since meeting up with Eyrie and Yuto. The recruiters close to him were the only ones who refused to approach him, and there was a considerable distance between him and them. The recruiters all looked away when Sheltis was about to make eye contact with them - it was as though they had seen something extremely scary.

"Seems like everyone is trying to avoid you."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> whispered.

"You are a cadet-guard who has already received your white ceremonial clothing, and yet you refused to wear them. Even though you have just joined the squad, you have already defeated a senior cadet-guard in a duel..... in their eyes, you are not an outstanding cadet-guard - rather, there's too many mysteries about you."

"..... I can't blame them."

He did not know if the smile on his face was a self-deprecating one or a bitter one, but he started walking anyway. He avoided going to the crowded elevators and made a detour along the outskirts of the crowd, and went into the emergency stairs.

"Really?"

"Mhmm, because..... I can understand their feelings."

The painful feelings of isolation he once felt back when he was expelled from the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

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It was very similar to what he was experiencing now.

"It would be great if I could change into my white ceremonial clothing and interact with them normally."

"I guess. Still, it is better for you not to provoke the upper brass of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> for now."

The reason he could reenter the palace was because he had the joint support from five of the highest ranked members of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> - the Priestesses and Sennenshi, including Ymy and Leon.

Typically speaking, a single Priestess or Sennenshi will be more than sufficient to wield their absolute power to influence the decisions.

But Sheltis' reentering of the palace required the joint efforts of five people for the matter to pass through. In other words, there was a huge force that resisted his reentering the palace, and it required that much influence to counterbalance the opposition.

"In other words, you will have to properly conceal your true identity as long as you are in here. Should anyone ask why you wear that black jacket, you would have to reject them directly. Even if that would result in you facing distrust and criticism from everyone, you absolutely cannot allow anyone to know about the fact that you have fallen into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> before, or how your body is now carrying mateki."

"..... Yeah."

It was the decision of the top brass to expell Sheltis from the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> two years ago. He had not came into contact with them yet, but they should be very unhappy about his reentering of the palace.

"The top brass of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, especially the directors, are all very concerned about the social order. If

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the fact about them allowing a person carrying mateki to reenter the palace is exposed to the public, it will cause a huge uproar among the civilians, and not just within the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>."

"I know. I definitely won't reveal my true identity, even if it means not being trusted by the people around me."

Should chaos result from the disclosure of his secret, he would definitely be expelled from the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> permanently, so as to take responsibility for all the commotions caused.

"That's how it is. Also, in regards to selecting your squad, it will be better for you to chose a squad that has as few members as possible."

"I'll try my best, though I don't know if things will go that smoothly."

He learned about the gist of the promotion system from the girl with sakura-colored hair.

He was not sure if the current system can be considered good or bad. But in the short time span of two years which he was not around, there had been many changes which he was not aware of, and he could clearly feel how he was left far behind from all the developments of the palace.

"Compared to how things were when I first started out, there really has been a lot of changes."

"Yes. But you will have to face them all, starting today."

There will be a practice on team battles conducted in the afternoon for the the second grade cadet-guards who are interested. Naturally, that includes Sheltis, who was only promoted to that rank just a day ago.

"Since it is a team battle, you may have a chance to see for yourself what the current squads are like. Try to join a squad which still has some space left for extra members, and experience it yourself."

The most important thing for him right now was to confirm what sort of squads there are via actual combat.

"In any case, I'll know how things are like by today."

Sheltis mumbled softly as he stared at the cards given to him by Eyriey, as though he was talking to himself.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, two hundred and eighty seventh story.

"..... Leon, urm....."

Upon hearing the hesitant voice of the girl, Leon opened his tightly shut eyes.

The floors were covered with an orange carpet. From the ceilings hung a glamorous chandelier made from refined glass. Behind him was a well tidied bookshelf and desk. A spacious family kitchen exists deeper within. The size of the room is big enough to allow a family of four to live comfortably.

"..... Sorry for interrupting your meditation."

"Don't worry about it. Anything wrong?"

The girl who was lowering her head timidly.

The buds of summer, Syun-rei - the Priestess who Leon is assigned to protect exclusively.

She has black hair and eyes, and her delicate looks make her look a year or two younger than her actual age of seventeen. Her unique vestment is made up of red and white fabrics, with a purple sash tied along her chest.

"..... The deadline for the mission assigned by Queen Salah is approaching."

"Ah, that mission....."



Queen Salah holds the highest position in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. She is a woman who possesses the strongest shinryoku in the whole floating continent.

She leads the five Priestesses, and spends most of her time throughout the year in the top most level of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, which is named <<Paradise>>. As of now, she should be in <<Paradise>> focusing on her prayers for Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

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During her resting period last month, the Queen assigned a mission to Leon.

A mission that will involve a certain secret - something that can only be done by a Sennenshi.

"..... 'The team should consist only of a minimum amount of people, so as to keep the issue as low as possible. Aside from Sennenshi Leon, there can only be one, at most two more people in the team. Please pick someone trustworthy to go along with you'..... what should we do?"

"Seems like the issue about the team is much more troublesome than the actual mission itself."

Having taken a glance at the mission outline, it was certain that the cadres or leader guards will not be able to participate in it. The only people who can join are those who are of low positions in *Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>*. Also, the person must be tight-lipped, trustworthy, and possess fine skills all at the same time.

"..... Does Leon have someone in mind?"

"There's probably only one person who can fulfill such ridiculous requirements."

"I had already told you yesterday during night training that we would be conducting battles in teams of two at 1500 hours."

The instructor's roaring voice echoed throughout the outdoor training grounds.

"So everyone is to find a partner and submit your application as a pair to the digital roster located at the first resting area. Those who are done with the application can rest till 1500 hours."

..... Team of two huh?

Sheltis took a quick glance at over a hundred cadet-guards who had gathered here.

"We guessed wrong. I thought it would have been a team battle of a much larger scale."

"Yeah."

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If the teams were to be made up of three or four people, then Sheltis' prediction of how the teams will be made up of the usual squad members would probably come true. He can then observe the situations of the various squads to look for one that is suitable for him. But that could no longer work with the situation they were in.

"That's all. Dismiss!"

As the instructor turned away from them, the cadet-guards began to leave.

"That's quite a problem we have here."

Having heard that from *crystal machine* <Iris>, Sheltis surveyed the scene yet again.

The cadet-guards were heading out in all directions in synchronized footsteps. They were all second grade cadet-guards, which means they were granted access to the Merit System. However, as someone who had just been promoted into the ranks only yesterday, Sheltis didn't recognize anyone.

There were over a hundred of them there, and they ranged from men in their forties, to girls in their teenage years. Who's good at fighting, and who's good with their strategies? What about their choice of weapons? How's their personality and habits?

Sheltis had no clue who he should team up with.

"Sheltis, over there. It looks a little strange."

"What's wrong?"

"Look at the people around you. It may look like they are dispersing in all directions, but everyone's heading towards the north in pairs in the end."

"—Eh?"

Acting on the reminder of the *crystal machine* <Iris>, Sheltis hurriedly looked at the cadet-guards around him.

Only a few minutes had passed since the dismissal of the cadet-guards, but everyone was already

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heading towards the northern pathway with a partner. The pathway leads to the first resting area, which was where the digital roster was located at.

..... How can that be? There were no discussions on teaming up among the cadet-guards.

"Seems like the reason for the initial dispersion was so that they could make contact with their squad-mates. They will then break up into teams of two when everyone in the squad has assembled. If the squad is made up of an odd number of people, they'll probably team up with another squad whom they are on good terms with."

Things are not looking good.

I'll have to find someone who I can team up with as quickly as possible. That is of a greater priority than winning or losing.

"..... I get it."

As he bit on his lips tightly, Sheltis recalled Leon's words that were passed to him through Ymy.

He will have to be aware of the position he's in within the other cadet-guards. Otherwise, he may be ostracized.

Should he act like how he used to do so back in the past, he will face a lot of problems.

That was exactly what was happening to him. Regardless of how outstanding a cadet-guard he is, he will not be able to promote or participate in training if he is not in a squad.

..... I never thought that things would be that serious.

Without a squad, he will not be able to get a partner who he can train with. He totally did not anticipate that.

"Then again, it's not like everyone will be able to team up with people whom they are familiar with. You should approach the cadet-guards who are still lacking a partner, and form a team with them."

"Mmm— Ah, the gunner over there. Can you please team up with me....."

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He walked towards a heavy-gunner and extended his hands.

"....."

Having seen Sheltis approaching him, the heavy-gunner made a forced turn and walked away from him.

There was no way he could not have heard that.

"Eh, strange? Wait....."

He shouted at the person, but the gunner did not turn back.

It was the same with the female archer after that. She turned away from his direction before he could even open his mouth to speak.

"It is indeed the same as this morning. Everyone's avoiding you."

"..... Let's try to find someone else."

Sheltis began to ask the cadet-guards one by one, but no one was willing to answer him. It was akin to him trying to grab water with his hands - no matter how hard he tried, the opposite party would somehow slip away from him.

That scene repeated on for countless times.

Before he knew it, Sheltis was the only person left.

"There's not much time left till 1500 hours."

At then, even the voice of the *crystal machine* <Iris> that he was so used to hearing sounded just like the solemn declaration of his death.

"I know, but what can I do?"

Sheltis shrugged in frustration with a sigh.

The faint feelings which he had during the incident near the elevator this morning had turned into

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something definite and concrete.

It was obvious that all the other cadet-guards were shunning him — the unknown and mysterious cadet-guard who wears the unique black jacket. The victory he obtained in the duel on the second day should have been an opportunity for him to showcase his skills, but instead it had caused everyone to distrust him.

"What a pain it is....."

It would be okay if it was just for today. However, such things will definitely continue on from tomorrow onward.

As a cadet-guard, he has a more definite goal than everyone else, and possess exceptional skills as well. However, he was facing the helpless feeling of isolation in just about everything else.

"Seems like the only thing we can do is ask the instructor to pair you up with someone."

"That won't do. It will not be a solution to the roots of my problem..... Ah!"

Before he could finish his sentence, Sheltis suddenly ran towards a person whom he had caught sight of in the corner of his eyes.

"W-Wait, Sheltis! Where are you going!"

Sheltis sprinted on the dunes of the training grounds without answering. The silhouette of the dot in the fringe of his sight soon became clearer and clearer—

"You are....."

Upon sensing someone approaching her, the girl lifted her head.

"H-Hey! Are you alone right now? Have you teamed up with anyone else?"

"Who me?"

With one of her hands holding onto the *crossed rods* <Rosario>, the girl with sakura-colored hair opened her eyes wide.

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"If you are here, it means you are one of the participants for the team battles, right?"

"I am..... you're not in a team yet?"

"Mmm, cause nearly everyone else has a partner already."

Having heard that, Sheltis could see a change in the girl's expression for the very first time. She was putting on a faint wry smile, as though she had seen something strange.

"How surprising, I thought you would have joined an excellent squad already."

"..... It's just the opposite."

"Opposite?"

The smile on her face disappeared, and her expression became serious once more. Sheltis spread his arms out wide and explained,

"Well..... you see, everyone's wearing white, while I'm the only one who's wearing a black jacket. After my duel with the cadet-guard yesterday, it seems like I can't break into the circles of the other cadet-guards..... Seems like everyone is finding me suspicious, and I'm always rejected no matter who I approached."

"But of course. The paired mock battles can be considered as a sort of formal exercise. It is the same as putting yourself in danger if you do not team up with a person whom you can trust."

That's right.

The words that she had said must be what the heavy-gunner and the archer were thinking back then as well.

"..... So it's indeed like that. For a loner like me....."

If that was the view of the only girl whom he had talked with and feels slightly closer to, then it would be even more so for the other cadet guards.

..... There's probably no hope in participating in the team battle this time round.

"Sorry for disturbing you then."

"Hey, where are you going?"

"To find Instructor. I'm telling her there's no one who's willing to team up with me, and I'll request for her to allow me to train on my own."

"You're here to ask me to partner up with you, right?"

"Yes, but....."

Allow me to finish what I have to say — she showed an expression as though she was saying that, and sighed,

"Well, I never rejected you, did I?"

"Eh?"

The girl seemed to be rather embarrassed, and turned her head away.

"I'll warn you first. My performance is poor, and thus no one is willing to team up with me..... Therefore, I am in the same boat as you."

"R-Really!? Can I really partner up with you!?"

"Or rather, are you sure you want to team up with me? There should be other cadet-guards whom you can still try your luck on. In consideration to my combat abilities, I think it is better for you to choose other cadet-guards instead."

"N-Nothing of that sort!"

In response to the confused expressions of the girl, Sheltis shook his head furiously.

"It's because the only person who has spoken to me and is willing to team up with me is you."

"I..... it's actually....."

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"I'll be in your care then! Ah, my name's Sheltis. May I know your name?"

"..... Monica. Monica Esperanto."

Despite her surprise, she managed to tell Sheltis her name, albeit rather shyly.

"There's ninety eight participants, which totals up to forty-nine teams. That's slightly less than the original numbers, but since it will be easier for me to organize everything, I am mighty fine with it."

The suited female instructor stopped her fiddling of a tread-like tobacco, and loudly said,

"Just like what I said, you guys are gonna do team battles in a pair. I've already randomly decided on your opponents, and have already sent the details to your badges. Hurry up and head towards the combat area after you are done confirming your opponents."

"That's it. Hurry, Sheltis, hurry..... let me take a look at your badge, or else I'll hack into it."

"Ah— man, what's with the hurry?"

The badge of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> functions as an identity card and a communicator at the same time. Aside from controlling the locks of their room, one can receive instructions and commands via the simple messages sent to their badge.

"Eh? That's strange."

He could find no information about their opponents on the screen behind the card.

A malfunction? Or perhaps the instructor got it wrong or something?

"It's the same for me too. There's no records about our upcoming opponent."

Monica finished meddling around with the screen, and looked downwards with a confused expression on her face.

There were a total of forty-nine teams participating. As each team will only be facing another pair, there will be a single team left after dividing the teams into twenty four different battles. Due to

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their late registration, they could be the team that was left out of the battles.

"Oh, I've finally found you. Sheltis, and this is Monica, right? What are you guys hanging around here for?"

The female instructor pried open the surrounding crowd and walked towards them.

"We aren't hanging around. It seems like our opponents haven't been registered into the systems yet....."

"Your opponents are over there. I told you, I've already decided on your opponents."

She pointed the smoking cigarette in a certain direction — it was a dome made of translucent reinforced glass, used specially for major fights with spectators involved.

"There?"

"Yeah. Your opponents inside should be about done as well."

One could clearly see the clouds of dust inside the dome through the glass walls.

— That's?

An occasional streak of metallic grey light flashed from within the dirty-yellow and brown clouds of dust. There were also countless lead-colored impacts bouncing off the glass walls randomly, as though they were trying to destroy the dome.

"Seems like they are done. They will be your opponents. Oi, Jin and Issha!"

The instructor yelled out as she lit up yet another cigarette.

The dust inside the dome gradually cleared away. With the dust clearing up, they could gradually see the two people inside.

A petite girl with her golden hair tied in twintails. There were several huge metal balls floating by her side.

A tall and stout bald male dual gunner, with a pair of heavy pistols in his hands.

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Both of them were wearing the ceremonial clothing of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. However, there was an obviously different air around them as compared to the cadet-guards nearby.

"The dual gunner guy in the half-coat is Jin, while the girl wearing the skirt is Issha. Hurry up and enter. Don't make them wait."

"Instructor, this.....? What's going on here?"

Monica turned around to question the Instructor with a soft voice. What she was looking at were the badges located on their left arms.

— The badges of a regular guard.

"I have a faint impression of that puppeteer and the dual gunner. They are the real deal, the regular guards."

Having heard Monica's words, Sheltis directed his sight back to the dome.

There was no need for him to look at the badges on their left arms. The intimidating presence of the two people were more than enough proof that they really were the regular guards of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"You scared?"

"N-Nothing like that.....! It's just that the difference in strength is too overwhelming."

"It's fine. Let's go."

He gave a pat on Monica's shoulders, before turning around to face the dome.

"Don't worry. Since I was the one who invited you to be on the team, I'll think up of something."

"Do we..... have a chance of winning?"

"Well, the probability's not zero. Moreover, we will have to face them sooner or later anyway, should we want to become a regular guard or even higher. Isn't that right?"

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If the aim is to become the guard of the highest rank, the 'Sennenshi'.

There is no longer any no room for retreat. That was the resolve he had since returning to *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"That's right, just go in and fight. The results will be for later."

As the happy voice of the instructor rang from behind them, the two of them walked towards the battlefield made of glass.

The dome has a circumference of about thirty meters wide. The internal terrain is a replica of the mountainous areas made up of sand and jutting rocks.

"A signal will be fired three minutes later. The battle shall start with the sound of the gun."

The instructor's voice blared through the speakers on the ceiling.

..... Right, what's next?

There was a distance of at least twenty meters between them and the two regular guards. Their opponents seemed to be discussing something as they looked towards them, but it was impossible to hear them from such a far distance.

"Monica's weapon is that pair of *crossed rods* <Rosario> right? Can you use any long-ranged weapons?"

"Sorry, I only know how to use this. What about you aside from your dual swords?"

"It's the same for me too."

"It will be a real headache for you two to face the dual gunner, since the both of you are close-ranged fighters. Not only does he have quick reflexes, due to him being a regular guard, his typical training consists of him accurately shooting down cherries that are a distance of fifty meters away. In a caged dome arena like this, there is probably no place where you two can escape."

As such, they would have to force the battle into a close-ranged one. However, there was an obstacle to that.

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A regular-guard who is a shinryoku-practitioner — the female 'puppeteer' standing next to the dual gunner.

They are guards who do not rely on martial arts for combat. Different from the shinryoku arts of the Priestesses and apprentice-Priestesses, they utilize shinryoku arts that have been specially modified for combat. One of the many forms of a shinryoku-practitioner is a puppeteer.

"I think you should know already. Puppets are objects that have received shinryoku from their hosts, who will then fight by remotely controlling the puppets. She may look small, but we cannot allow ourselves to drop our guard."

Monica lifted her *crossed rods* <Rosario> calmly.

"Her puppets are the four spheres on the ground. It's size is about the size of a child's hugs, but their weight should be at around fifty kilograms each. If she is controlling them via shinryoku, then the range of control..... should be about twenty meters."

"Prior to getting close to the far-ranged dual gunner, we'll have to deal with the puppeteer who is in control of the mid-range..... Speaking of which, you know quite a lot about these things."

"That puppeteer named Issha is a well known shinryoku-practitioner among the regular guards."

She shrugged her shoulders as a matter of factly.

"So? Do we focus on her first?"

"That's about the only thing we can do. However, we will be easy targets for the dual gunner if we are to move together. The opponents will probably expect us to do the same as well."

Sheltis shifted his sight to the dual gunner for a brief moment, before focusing on onto the puppeteer girl again.

"So we might as well go for a one-on-one tactic. I'll try to finish the girl, and then we'll both gang up on the dual gunner."

"..... You want to take on the puppeteer, who is a regular guard, alone?"

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"Mmm. As for Monica, try your best to divert the attention of the dual gunner— here we go!"

Boom!

The signal shook the glass. At the same time, Sheltis and Monica leaped off in two different directions.



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Bang— the opponent's bullet came smashing through the walls at the same time the signal was fired. No, perhaps it was even earlier than that. Is that their way of greeting us?

"Monica, I'll leave him to you!"

With his back facing Monica, Sheltis focused his attention on the puppeteer girl.

He ran, and began to accelerate.

He sprinted on the sides of the hills which were faithfully replicated off their originals, and jumped off a huge boulder. His surroundings changed in an instant - he had gained grounds on the girl in a blink of an eye.

"..... He's fast."

The girl named Issha mumbled expressionlessly, and jumped backwards.

Puppeteers excel in mid-ranged combat. As he tried to chase the girl who was attempting to keep a considerable distance away from him, Sheltis dashed through the bumpy slopes as though he was running on smooth level ground.

— "Deploy, and release" —

The girl lifted her right arm.

At the same time, two metallic grey spheres came gliding in through the air.

"As for the controls of the four spheres, the opponent has chosen to utilize the basic setup of using half of it for offense, and the other half to defend herself."

The spheres were made up of highly compressed metals. Having obtained shinryoku and the potential energy, the extremely heavy objects were zooming in from his left and right at high speeds. He lured them before his eyes—

Don

As though he wanted to shake off the sounds of his footsteps, Sheltis immediately stopped himself from advancing further. The silver spheres which were aiming for Sheltis lost their targets, and sailed through the thin air.

He shot a quick glance at the spheres, before accelerating yet again.

"!"

The girl's expression changed suddenly as she realized that the young man had shrunk the distance between them in a flash.

— "Engage" —

The other set of defensive spheres were activated.

The extremely heavy 'puppets' which were giving off a metallic silver glow were crashing diagonally downwards at Sheltis' head. However, instead of dodging it, Sheltis chose to pick up speed in the direction of the spheres.

He seized the exact moment to swing his dual swords at the incoming spheres.

A brilliant flash of his swords.

At the same time, the floating metallic grey spheres fell onto the ground with a dull thud. The girl was totally speechless - the two fallen spheres were sliced perfectly in half along the smooth surfaces.

".....!"

That is unbelievable. He could clearly feel what the opponent was thinking from the expressions on her face. However, as expected from the regular guards, she immediately released herself from the shock, and returned to a calm state.

— "Seek, and release" —

Abandoning the destroyed defensive spheres, the girl sent instructions to the two initial spheres..... But this time, Issha was forced to open her eyes wide.

The spheres which were originally in her control were no longer moving.

"Sorry, those won't work either."

"Eh?"

Sheltis pointed towards his back.

What came to her eyes, were the other two spheres that were sliced in the same manner.

"Eh..... H-How is that possible?"

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"No, all I did was make a slash prior to my dodge - or what is commonly known as 'Zantetsu'." [TLNote: 斬鉄, literally hacking of metal. I guess it is a name of a move or some sort, so I chose to preserve its pronunciation.]

"..... What a mess."

With all her weapons destroyed, the girl could only fall onto the ground in a daze.

"Are you really a cadet-guard? And not an elite guard or a cadres guard?"

— There are a lot of reasons behind what you are seeing.

Sheltis made a silent answer to the girl in his heart, and turned away from her.

Where's Monica— there she is!

The battle on the other side was exactly opposite of what had happened on his side. The two of them were fighting near the edges of the walls.

Monica had reflected all the bullets fired at her from the dual pistols. The *crossed rods* <Rosario> had indeed lived up to their name of sporting an impressive defense..... However, it was ultimately a situation where she had been suppressed by the opponent the whole time.

She could find no opportunity to close the distance, and instead she was slowly forced against the wall.

"Guh!"

Her left shoulder was struck by a bullet which she was unable to deflect. Despite it being a dud, it still packed quite a punch. A sharp pain spread from her shoulder to her wrists, which resulted in the *crossed rods* <Rosario> slipping off from Monica's hand.

"Monica!"

Sheltis yelled in her direction.

Or that was what it looked like. In reality, his actual motive was to attract the attention of the dual gunner.

"..... Issha was defeated?"

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The expression of the dual gunner changed for a brief moment as he saw the young man running towards him at high speeds. He continued restraining Monica with the pistol on his right, and diverted his sight to Sheltis.

Sheltis had managed to close in on the dual gunner as well by evading the multiple bullets fired at him. Upon realizing that, the opponent changed his direction nimbly and made effortless jumps on the uneven rocky slopes to pull away from Sheltis.

"This regular guard named Jin is quite impressive in terms of his physical abilities. That retaliatory posture of his while jumping through the air is really graceful to look at."

Sheltis once again took chase at the dual gunner who the *crystal machine* <Iris> was praising, and tried to force him against the wall by rounding him up.

Five meters remaining. It was the face-off of the young man who kept trying to close in the distance between the two in a single breath, against the dual gunner who was constantly evading him. The chase continued on for a few minutes.

— It's now!

Out of no where, Sheltis raised his dual swords.

"!"

The opponent lifted his eyebrows in confusion. As there was still a five meter distance between them, it was impossible for the twin swords to strike him. Despite knowing that, Sheltis..... tossed out both of his swords at Jin.

"..... What?"

The dual gunner gave a gasp of shock as he witnessed the swords flying towards him. He deflected the incoming swords with his pistols, then took aim at the weaponless young man.

Just then, a dull sound came ringing from within the dome.

"....."

An unexpected impact on the back of his head had finally caused the dual gunner to collapse onto the ground.

"..... This is for the shot at my shoulder earlier."

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Behind him, was a panting Monica holding onto a pair of *crossed rods* <Rosario> in her hands.

"Ohhh, a perfect hit."

"Stop mocking me."

She turned her slightly red face away.

"Mmm, Jin and Issha, it's been tough on you two. Return to your stations for now..... As for you two."

After giving thanks to the dual gunner and the puppeteer, Instructor Yumelda turned around to face them.

"I'll ignore the initial part of the battle, which was extremely reckless. Well, the part where you threw your swords to gain the attention of the enemy, followed up by a strike from behind, is something that can be considered as a pass."

The instructor lit up yet another cigarette.

"See, I told you, you can't just go rushing in recklessly right at the beginning. Learn to use your brains for once."

"I'm already trying my best."

Sheltis gave a slight pout and retracted his blades.

Then again, he didn't remember performing that sort of combination attack with Leon back then.

As the both of them possess exceptional skills, he could easily count the number of times they had teamed up.

"But this is quite a problem for me now. I had originally planned to say 'Hurry up and get on your feet' to the both of you after you two had been soundly defeated by them. I didn't make any plans for the aftermath of your victories."

"So we are that weak in your eyes huh."

"Whatever. Do your own training for the rest of the day then. Dismissed."

"..... How very slip-short of her."

He could not come up with a decent retort, and could only wave his hands at her as she left.

"Oh right. Thanks, Monica. It's all thanks to you, that I had the chance to participate in the training."

"Ah..... Ahhh."

The expressionless girl blinked for a moment, as though she was recovering from a daze.

"What's wrong with you?"

"No..... I never expected us to win....."

As he was used to her stern disposition, that stuttering look of hers was quite refreshing in Sheltis' eyes.

"Just because they are the regular guards?"

No, it's not that.

Monica mumbled, and stared at the sky in a daze.

"..... This..... is the very first time I have obtained victory in a team battle by teaming up with someone else..... Of course, I know very well it was all due to your efforts that we won."

First time?

It sounds way too exaggerated for a cadet-guard to have not won even once.

"You think it's strange.....? For anyone who can't get into a good squad or team up with good teammates, they will end up like how I am. To me, you are the unfathomable one. You are a newcomer who enrolled here just a few days ago, so how did you manage to overwhelm that pair of regular guards?"

"No, it's actually quite difficult for me as well. I guess part of the reason is they were underestimating us due to our ranks as cadet-guards. You're exaggerating by saying that I was overwhelming them. Moreover, what I'm more surprised about was how Monica was practicing the arts of shinryoku deep into the night—"

He said too much.

He realized that only after seeing the expression on Monica's face.

"..... You saw everything?"

He did not know if it was her sorrow or anger, but an intense emotion swelled up from within her grayish blue eyes.

Her delicate shoulders were trembling slightly.

".....!"

Monica's head sunk low, and she was biting onto her lips tightly. She turned around without saying a word.

"Ah..... urm..... wait, Moni—"

"Don't follow me!"

He was about to stretch out his hands, but her yell stopped him in his tracks.

She wanted to get mad, but she couldn't do it; she tried to cry, but she could not cry either. While she was hopelessly stuck in between her swaying emotions, she finally let out a stubborn yet fragile voice.

"..... Training's over..... Please allow me to rest."

{2}

"Ahh— it's finally over."

Sheltis slumped onto his bed with a sense of tiredness in his sigh.

"....."

He held his breath and closed his eyes, as though he was trying to confirm the sensation of his body sinking into the bed sheets that he was lying on.

"You don't look like you are sleeping, but rather, you are

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thinking about something."

"..... I just feel like I've done something wrong to Monica."

Which included him peeking at her training.

As well as knowing how she can use the rites of a Priestess.

He should not have said anything in front of her.

"..... Will she forgive me if I apologize?"

"It's hard to say. From a neutral point of view, I don't think Sheltis has done anything wrong. The training grounds are an open place, and since she chose to train there, she should be mentally prepared to be seen by someone else. It was only natural that she got seen by you."

"Well, you're not wrong, but it's still not good for me to look at her while hiding myself in secret."

"Fufu, I am not denying that. Therefore, I won't object if you wish to apologize to her."

He flipped over and stared at the ceiling.

..... Mmm, I should just apologize.

..... Because she is the first person to talk to me, and she treats me rather nicely.

Sheltis would not have been able to join the team battle without her. After countless rejections, she was the only one who agreed when he invited her to team up, and that made Sheltis really happy.

"So back to the previous topic. Why isn't that girl in any of the squads? Her abilities are not particularly outstanding, but she's not weak either."

It would be a different case if she was looking to join a squad that is made up of highly-skilled guards, but if she isn't overly demanding, she should be able to find a squad that would be willing to accept her at the very least. But from her words, it's not that she is 'not willing to join', but rather, 'she was not accepted'.

Why is that?

"In the end, we'll still have to ask her if we want to get some answers."

"Right, but you can't be overly anxious about it. In any case, apologize to her properly tomorrow."

"Mmm..... got it."

I'll just rest for today.

Just as he was about to switch off the lights in his room—

"Sheltis, there's a mission for you."

A familiar voice that leaves no room for questions blared out from the speakers on the ceiling.

..... Leon?

"I need to speak to you. Take the central elevator to the two hundred and eighty-seventh story now."

"..... Fu— Fu—"

"There's no point in you faking. I heard your conversation with Iris clearly."

"That's just too cheap!"

Sheltis jumped out of bed.

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"..... I had been suspecting this all along - is there some sort of surveillance camera installed in this room?"

Who'll be interested in photographing Sheltis in secret— after tossing the grumbling crystal onto the pillow, Sheltis looked up into the speakers unwillingly.

"Fine, I'll just have to head to your room?"

"Yeah. We'll talk in my room. And bring Iris along as well."

The two hundred and eighty-ninth story to the two hundred and eighty-seventh story are specially reserved for the use of the Priestesses and Sennenshi. Leon, Syun-rei and Ymy's room are all located on the two hundred and eighty seventh story.

But, what sort of important mission are they going to discuss, seeing as they need to do so in Sennenshi Leon's room?

"We'll be safe from the ears of others if we are to discuss it in my room."

"Oh— Alright. Let's go, Iris."

"Uhhhh, but I am tired already—"

After putting on the necklace with Iris hanging on it, Sheltis left the room.

"That's quick of you."

The sight of a silver haired young man in a pure white coat suddenly appeared before his eyes as the doors of the central elevator opened.

Leon flashed a wry smile as he held on to a brass watch in his hand.

"I wonder who's the one who is persistently hastening me..... Eh?"

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Sheltis couldn't help but blink his eyes upon seeing the faintly moving shadows behind Leon.

"Urm..... You are Syun-rei, right? Good evening."

As she grabbed onto Leon's coat tightly, the girl with black hair and eyes popped her head out of his back.

She's the forth Priestess out of the five — Syun-rei Pia Nucclene.

According to Ymy, she has severe anthrophobia. She is extremely wary towards males, to the point where she will just turn around and run away if she spots a staff of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"..... G-Good..... evening."

After saying that with an almost inaudible voice, she quickly hid behind Leon's back again. On the other hand, Leon was looking rather pleased.

"Oh, Syun-rei's trying her best. So you've learned how to greet others, right?"

"..... Mmm."

The girls face was blushing slightly upon receiving the praises of Leon. As someone who is very timid even towards the other Priestesses, her partner Sennenshi is the only person whom she opens her heart to.

"In any case, let us continue the talk in my room. Follow me."

Leon began to make his move on the passageway, and Syun-rei followed tightly behind him. Sheltis followed up with them as well—

Just as the group of them was about to approach the junction in front of the central elevator.

"Eh? Leon and Syun-rei? What a surprise to be seeing you two at this hour."

A girl in her white vestment made her turn at the junction.

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She greeted Leon and Syun-rei with a smile, and was walking towards the direction of the elevator - which was towards them.

"..... Sheltis?"

Ymy stopped in her tracks with a confused expression on her face.

"Why are you here? Anything wrong?"

"Ah. Well—"

Before he could even explain—

"It's about that mission from the Queen. Me and Sheltis will be carrying it out together. As we have to keep it a secret from the rest of the members, I will be explaining it to him in my room."

Leon replied before him.

"The mission about the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon>?"

"Yeah. Needless to say, the only other person coming along is Sheltis."

"..... I see."

Ymy was still standing on her spot with her eyes looking in the air blankly. Not long after, she said with a determined expression,

"L-Look, Leon. I want to tag along too..... can I?"

I wish to join the both of you. She looked at Leon akin to how a child looks at his parents as he begged them to buy something for him.

After a moment of silence.

"— That may be quite difficult."

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Leon rejected her heavily.

"The mission is too dangerous for you, since you are without a Sennenshi."

"But, Leon and Sheltis are both going right? There should be nothing to worry about if that's the case."

"I do feel the same way as well, but that is not the case for the General Affairs Council, the Mechanical Bureau as well as the Tower Controls - just like how it was with Director Albert the last time round. You can try requesting to join in the mission without your personal Sennenshi, but I think you will definitely be facing stiff resistance from them."

"....."

Ymy kept silent.

Leon's words were absolutely correct, without any room for refutes.

"Moreover, without the presence of any Sennenshi, the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> will be protected by someone else during my absence. Syun-rei had planned to stay here this time, so we will be depending on the both of you."

"..... Mmm."

Ymy nodded her head sullenly - however, she then lifted her head suddenly.

"Syun-rei..... Sheltis..... What's up..... with you two?"

"What's wrong, Ymy?"

"B-Because....."

Ymy lifted her hands. Her lips were trembling.

"You two can actually..... can actually touch each other.....?"

She pointed at the left shoulder of Syun-rei.

Unknown to them, Sheltis' right arm had somehow come into contact with Syun-rei's left shoulder. Perhaps that was the case all along since their sudden pause at the junction.

..... However, that should be something that is impossible.

"How? Something like this—"

Without any clue to how that happened, Sheltis immediately jumped backwards away from Syun-rei.

Logically speaking, he should not be able to touch the Priestesses at all.

'Shinryoku' are the source of power for the Priestesses that opposes the power of the Yuugenshu, which is 'mateki'. The two powers of different nature should be repelling each other upon contact. Moreover, since he possess the mateki of the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, there should be a strong repulsion occurring against the Priestesses, who are in possession of strong shinryoku.

If so, why did nothing happen even after coming into contact with Syun-rei?

"What's happening? I thought you couldn't touch the Priestesses?"

"I thought so too. But, why....."

Leon was confused as well.

"Sheltis. Leon and I know very well about how Ymy's shinryoku and your mateki will repel each other under contact. What about the other Priestesses then? Will there be the same phenomenon as well?"

The *crystal machine* <Iris> broke the silence that filled the air with nervousness and shock in a calm voice.

"Well....."

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He never tried. The reason for finding out the existence of mateki in his body was due to the repulsion against the shinryoku of Ymy. *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> would never agree to let him try it out with the other Priestesses.

That's right. He had never tried it till now. Sheltis assumed his mateki would be rejected by all the Priestesses without any confirmation. It's the same not only for Ymy, but for Leon as well.

"Then, could it be....."

Sheltis could only stand in shock after understanding what the *crystal machine* <*Iris*> was trying to say.

A dizzying bewilderment that exceeded all anger and despair gradually spread out in his heart.

..... Why is reality that cruel?

..... There's only one out of all the Priestesses whom I am repelling.

"_____"

At that moment, unknown to Sheltis, Ymy had switched to a determined expression and was stretching her finger out towards his shoulder.

"Ymy! You can't!"

..... Eh?

He turned his head and saw Ymy biting her lips. Those eyes of hers were close to crying—

Her delicate finger touched his shoulders.

Zzz..... zzzzzz.....

His shoulder and her fingertip. A blueish white electric spark was given off from the point of contact.

Elbert Resonance.

When an overly powerful shinryoku meets an equally powerful mateki, the laws of physics will be twisted. Sparks will be produced in the air, delivering punishment to the two that tried to touch each other with flames.

".....!"

Ymy retracted her burnt fingertip and squatted down.

"Ymy!"

"What are you doing—"

Leon and the crystal machine yelled out at the same time.

"..... Because....."

That was the only thing she managed to say.

"..... This is just..... too cruel."

That sentence alone was more than enough for everyone at the scene to understand her feelings.

Why— Why am I the only one who can't touch Sheltis. Her sorrow was clearly shown via the sight of her trembling back.

"..... There's only one explanation for that."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> broke the silence yet again.

"It's the same with how Sheltis was repelled by the doors of the Grand Holy Hall. Ymy, you are in possession of the strongest shinryoku out of the five Priestesses. The reason why you're the only person to repel Sheltis..... is because your shinryoku is too powerful."

"....."

Those words seemed to have had its effects on Ymy.

Ymy stood up with her head still hanging low, as though she had accepted that explanation.

"Sheltis..... do your best in the mission."

She said that in an emotional tone.

"Ymy....."

Even though he had something he wished to say to Ymy, Sheltis chose to remain silent.

— Sorry, Ymy. Regardless of what I say right now, you will probably think I am just trying to console you.

— However..... My feelings are the same as yours.

He clenched his fists tightly, his fingernails digging deeply into his palms. He endured the overwhelming feeling of anxiety within him that could make him go crazy.

"Sorry everyone, for interrupting your mission debriefing. I'll be heading back first."

She then turned away from everyone.

Her long hair was swaying gently. They could faintly see her jade-colored eyes through the light-golden slits - there were tears that were about to fall off from the corners of her eyes.

"..... Syun-rei."

The black-haired girl turned her head upon hearing her name.

As he looked at Ymy's delicate back that was disappearing from his sight, Sheltis called out to the other Priestess next to him.

"Please, can you stay by Ymy's side?"

"..... Mmm."

The black-haired girl agreed instantly.

She nodded her head to her partner, and chased Ymy with her small steps.

"Sheltis. It may not be the best time to be doing this, but can we discuss the mission now?"

"..... I guess."

Sheltis leaned his back against the walls of the junction and stared into the ceiling. It seemed like he was thinking of something.

Though he has not found any solution to the mateki in his body, he believed there is definitely a way for him to purify the mateki within him.

He held on to the belief in him — as of now, the only thing he could do is focus his attention on the mission before him.

"Aren't we going to your room?"

"You will probably be filled with thoughts about Ymy anyway. Also, I don't wish to abandon Syun-rei and head back to my room alone."

Leon crossed his arms and smiled bitterly.

"It's late night anyway, and since they have tight controls over the entrance to this floor, I think it will be fine for us to talk here..... Well then, where should I begin?"

"Ymy mentioned something about the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon>. Are we heading there?"

"Ahh, all the Priestesses and Sennenshi know about it already. We are heading towards the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon>."

The only place where humans can live on — floating continent Orbie Clar.

That was the only continent in the world, with countless islands of various sizes floating around it.

The floating islands were used for many purposes - agriculture plantations were built there; giant windmills were constructed there as well to harness the wind energy to produce electricity. Even though the floating continent was the only place where humans could live, the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon> are equally essential to humans as well.

"Let's see..... the mission is to head to the islands? That's pretty common. There are lots of missions involving things like exploring uncharted islands, as well as investigating the geological makeup or the ecology of the islands, and so on."

He could not even cover the amount of missions he could have thought of with the fingers he had. The missions that required traveling to the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon> differ widely in nature, and there are a lot of those missions as well.

"That's right. Our mission falls under the guise of 'a mission that requires us to travel to the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon>'. Well, to start off, I think you should know the need of aircraft when we are traveling to the *Floating Archipelago* <Lagoon>. For the past few months, it seems like huge amounts of electric faeries have appeared along the main aviation routes. Our mission is to subjugate them."

Electric faeries are a sort of faerie that are active near clouds of thunder.

They love to store electrical charges in their bodies. However, they will cause a disturbance in the magnetic fields of nearby airspace if they appear in a large group. Though they cannot be considered as harmful as beasts, the humans can't simply ignore them either, as they will pose a problem for aircraft near them.

"..... This mission seems typical enough. Why is it considered classified then?"

Having heard that question, Leon showed a bitter expression which was not commonly seen from him.

"Because this involves the Government Sector."

"..... Them?"

On the floating continents, defense and politics were handled by two different organizations.

The Queen and her Priestesses are the ones with the highest positions in *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, and are tasked with the responsibility of protecting the continent.

On the other hand, the Government Sector are in charge of all things related to politics. Even though they are located in a corner of the *Floating Archipelago* <*Lagoon*>, and do not reveal themselves much on the floating continent regularly, they are still in charge of various core organizations that control the legislation, laws and etc.

If the Priestesses are the symbols of miracles and mysteriousness, the Pope of the highest order signifies politics and authority.

"The relationship between the Government Sector and *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> was never good to begin with, right?"

"Yeah. I only came to know of it after I became a Sennenshi. It was way worse than I had imagined."

It's damn irritating— Leon followed up with a grumble.

As they are the protectors of the floating continent, the residents of the living sector have naturally adored *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>.

However, as an organization that is in charge of politics, the Government Sector needs to maintain its prestige as well. The Government Sector seemed to be unhappy with how a good portion of the people respected only the Priestesses of the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, and has always stirred up trouble because of that.

"The floating island which we will be heading to is located within the territories owned by the Government Sector. They had always disliked interference from the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. If it is a group of typical guards heading there, they may face unnecessary hindrance from them."

"Which is where Leon comes in. That may be the case for the

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typical guards, but if the person is a Sennenshi who protects the Priestesses, the Government Sector will not openly impede him. The reason for bringing along a low-ranking Sheltis is to deceive the public as well. *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> can claim that this is a mission done by a certain newcomer, and the Sennenshi is the supervisor who is taking care of the useless cadet-guard."

"As expected of Iris, you got it immediately."

"..... Urm..... then my stand..... ah, forget it."

Having to face the *crystal machine* <*Iris*> and Leon who were going along with each other seamlessly, Sheltis could only continue on with the topic aside from releasing a glare of protest.

"So, when will the mission start? Next week? Next month?"

"It's tomorrow."

"..... Right, I should be going back to sleep. I still have morning practice tomorrow."

He suddenly turned and made a sprint towards the elevator, then pressed the button of the floor where his room was located..... but before he could do any of that, Leon had already grabbed him by his shoulder.

"Are you still planning to run away at a time like this?"

"Problem is, why do I have to head off tomorrow when I just heard of the details today? I don't know how that instructor will torture me if I skip my training without a valid reason!"

"Relax, Sheltis. I have already informed the instructor prior to this."

"..... Say what?"

"She asked me to relay this to you: go ahead and enjoy that short holiday..... when you return, I'll be loving you tenderly'. From the looks of it, this instructor is quite a considerate person."

"Can't you tell that she's really angry?"

"Hmm, is that so?"

"..... So you're not pretending to be dumb."

Sheltis lost his will to argue, and could only surrender unwillingly.

"Well, that's all. We'll gather at the airfield on the sixty-fifth story at nine tomorrow. Remember to go to the fifty-ninth story first to carry out the standard procedures at the counter of the Mechanical Bureau's aviation division."

The aviation division on the fifty-ninth story.

Strange? I've heard about it somewhere before.

"And another thing. It's about the make up of the team."

With that, Leon pointed towards the ceiling.

"Typically speaking, it is impossible for a Sennenshi and a cadet-guard to form a two-man team. If possible, I was hoping you'd find another trustworthy and tight-lipped person to join us. Only cadet-guards are allowed."

"Hmm— that's difficult, since I just returned not too long ago."

"I guessed as much..... whatever, we'll just go as a pair then, and settle it as quickly as we can."

The Sennenshi gave a helpless shrug.

In the end, it's still the same two-man combination from three years ago.

"Understood. Well then, I'll try to come up with something by tomorrow."

"Yeah. Also, I'll ask Syun-rei to take care of Ymy while we're on the mission."

"Mmm, please."

After directing a glance in the direction of Ymy's room, Sheltis left.

Tenketsu Palace <*Sophia*>, eleventh story.

"Eh?"

Sheltis stopped in his tracks after walking out from the central elevator.

He saw someone hanging outside of his room. Since the lights of the passageway were already out, plus the fact that he was still quite a distance away, all he knew was that the petite silhouette belonged to that of a girl.

"If she is a cadet-guard, she may be there to invite you into a squad. Though everyone's shunning you, there may be some cadet-guards who are actually impressed with your skills."

"She sure knows how to pick the time."

Really.

In a deliberate attempt to make himself heard by the person before his room, Sheltis walked towards her with loud footsteps.

"Sorry, may I know the reason for....."

A bunch of sakura-colored hair appeared faintly beneath the rays of the night light. She was wearing a plain colored shirt, which exposed her ceramic-white limbs in the air.

"Monica?"

"....."

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The girl pursed her lips and looked at him with a sharp piercing gaze. The memories of the day appeared clearly in his mind upon seeing the girl's face.

— Right, I'll have to apologize quickly.

He had no idea what Monica was there for, but he will have to apologize first for peeking at her while she trained in secret last night. Everything else is of secondary importance.

"L-Look, Monica. I am really sor—"

"Sorry."

"..... Huh?"

"I-I said, I'm sorry!"

Monica subconsciously raised her voice. She forgot that it was already deep into the night.

"..... I am really sorry for what happened during the day. You are the one who had invited me to team up for the battle, and it is because of you that we won. However, not only did I not thank you for all that, I threw a tantrum at you, and caused things to be so stiff between us."

She turned her slightly blushing face to the side, and bit her teeth hard.

"That's what I wished to say. Sorry for taking up your time."

"Ah. Monica, wait!"

"What?"

"You came all the way to my room just so that you could say those things to me?"

If she wants to apologize, she could have chosen to visit him tomorrow instead. However, she chose to come despite the late hour. And even though she knew he was not in his room, she still waited for him patiently.

Why is she so insistent—

"That's how I am. Is it really weird?"

"..... No."

Sheltis replied with a gentle laugh.

"I feel I should be the one apologizing. Sorry, I accidentally saw you while you were training in secret."

"Well, it's fine..... It's late, so I'll be heading back."

She was about to turn around and leave yet again.

Looking at her back—

"..... Ahhh!"

"Huh? What's with that loud yell all of the sudden?"

"G-Give me a second!"

Sheltis took out his badge from his chest pocket, and activated the communication device. He then connected himself to the Sennenshi whom he was familiar with.

"Hello? Leon? Eh, you're still training? That's not important, listen to what I have to say. I've found the third person for that mission. Don't worry, there's no problem. I can guarantee you that she is trustworthy. Mmm, please handle it then."

After a few quick words, he disconnected the call.

"Ah, sorry. I've just asked Leon - it should be fine for you to join us."

"..... Sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Monica was looking at him cluelessly.

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"Urm, how should I put it?"

It was as though a kid had thought up an excellent prank — that was the expression Sheltis had on his face as he asked,

"Monica, do you want to team up with me tomorrow? It's a real mission this time."

Intermission: The night of initiation

It was as though the sphere of sky was dyed with a transparent black ink.

The transparent night sky was so very dark, and yet it seemed to be within grasp at the same time.

There was the mysterious shadow of the azure moon, as well as the scattered stars that looked like jewels spilling out from a knocked-over chest.

..... It was a quiet night.

The cries of the birds, the buzz of the insects, as well as the rustling of the plants - none of those sounds could be heard.

The lush forestry. In the middle of the night where all living things were asleep—

"What a comfortable night."

A joyful female voice was gradually penetrating through the forest of the night.

In the deepest area of the sea of trees that were over a hundred years-old.

"It's not too bad to immerse yourself in nature occasionally. Having constantly exposed myself under artificial lighting, I have nearly forgotten the light of nature"

As she lifted her head to look at the countless twinkling stars, the corners of her lips became gentle.

..... Plop

She walked barefooted on the surface of the lake, producing a delicate sound from the waters.

It was a scene straight out of a fairy tale.

She was standing on the surface of the lake silently, amid the sea of trees.

A thin mysterious membrane of light was glowing in between her bare feet and the water's surface.

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It was as though the light was supporting the lady, preventing her from falling into the water.

"— Hmm, 'I feel the same too' huh? Seems like you have finally understood those feelings."

She gently closed her eyes. A smile appeared on the corner of her lips.

That was not her talking to herself.

She was actually directing her speech to a certain someone.

"Haha, 'Don't treat me like a kid'? Right, I get it."

The shoulder's of the lady trembled slightly.

A beautiful and dignified face, as well as a pair of amber-colored eyes that were close to golden. Her soft silky black hair draped down her back and onto her slender body.

Despite those exceptional features, the most attractive part about the scene was probably the graceful posture of her standing in stark nakedness, baring her skin for all to see.

"Hmm? Put on my clothes first before we talk? Why does it matter? It's your fault for sending me the telepathy message while I was enjoying my bath."

The moonlight was cold yet clear. Beneath the alluring lights—

A luscious naked body could be faintly seen.

"Moreover—"

She made a mischievous smile, and hugged her shoulders with her crossed arms.

"I am different from you. I won't feel embarrassed even if my body is seen by someone else."

Those slender shoulders of her tall body were tightly entwined by both of her arms.

Her barely covered breasts gave a slight quiver, as though they were about to spill out from the gaps of her two arms. Her thin waist and shapely hips carved out luscious and seductive curves exemplifying that 'devilish' body of hers.

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It was as though the beauty of her exposed body existed for the sole purpose of seducing men.

"Speaking of which, it's about time that child-like figure of yours—"

"..... Tsali, I am being serious here."

The slightly angry voice of a young girl reverberated through the silent forest.

It was one of the phenomenons of telepathy. It signified the intense emotions that the owner was experiencing.

"Don't be so angry. Fufu, you are so very cute."

However, the lady named Tsali looked really happy, and the smile on her face deepened.

"Rather than wasting your shinryoku to convert your telepathy messages into your voice, why don't you concentrate on the prayers of Hyouketsu Kyoukai instead?"

"..... I have never once slackened in regards to that."

With that, the voice of the young girl quieted down.

"That's right, be good and keep it to telepathy— Well then, what's your reason for contacting me via telepathy this late into the night?"

After a brief moment of silence.

"..... I see."

Having received the telepathy message from the young girl, the lady named Tsali cocked her eyebrow slightly.

"'The Cage of Frozen Time'..... It's the Forbidden Crystal?"

There was a hint of ecstasy in her laugh.

"How surprising. I thought it would be quite a while before we will be heading down to that floating

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island..... Ahh, we have to act before the Government Sector can get their hands on 'that'?"

Beneath the moonlight, the lady lifted her arms and peered into the surface of the lake.

"Understood. If so, I'll tag along as well."

"Sorry for the trouble."

"Jeez."

Her smile deepened once again with the voice of the young girl.

"Though I am quite interested in this as well."

Woosh— a gust of wind breezed past the water's surface.

It was similar to the gales of autumn, galloping through the gaps of the forest. The blown leaves were creating multiple ripples on the surface of the lake.

The wind then died down.

"— Ah, how very exciting. Don't you think so, Sheltis?"

On the surface of the lake that had regained its tranquility, was the reflection of a dark black vestment decorated with silver white ornaments.

Tsali was standing on the surface of the lake leisurely. She was wearing a thin vestment that complemented her seductive curves perfectly.

"Oh young man, who had fallen into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, and returned to the floating continent. It's time to proceed."

..... Plop

Along with a tiny ripple, she spread her arms out wide and gazed into the sphere of night sky.

Then.

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"'The Cage of Frozen Time' — the dreams of *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> that is still slumbering. What sort of *reality* <world> will it show you?"

Deep in the desolate forest, Tsali was silently smiling.

Chapter 3: Floating Archipelagos, under the enticement of an unknown intention

{1}

Mechanical Bureau—

Just as the name suggests, this is the division that focuses on the mechanical aspects of the tower. Most of the staff here are the clerical staff or technical staff. Their main task is to develop and maintain the electronics of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, as well as huge sized machines like aircraft.

The Mechanical Bureau occupies the forty-eighth story to the sixty-seventh story of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, which is a total of twenty stories. Most of those are used for research and development of machines, and one can easily see the staff walking with the developing robots just about everywhere. It is a rather unique bureau.

Within the Mechanical Bureau.

The most outstanding place is the <<Internal Airfield>> created by combining the sixty-fifth story and the sixty-sixth story — an aviation center located within *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"Whoa.....!"

The gate is located at the southern side of the floor.

Sheltis lifted his hands and broke into a cheer as the aircraft flew out of the floor and into the sky.

"That's just amazing, Iris. You see that? The consecutive take off of the two aircraft."

He could easily see giant aircraft painted in black and gold around him. Next to those were the silver mini-aircraft designed for the use of multiple people. Beside those mini-aircraft, were the unmanned scouting crafts which were giving off a loud humming sound, all raring to

go.

"You seem rather happy."

"It's been a long time since I've been here. I've always loved to ride in those aircraft."

Nothing has changed.

The two flat runways in the middle of the place; the uniformed technicians who were conducting the final checks for the machines; as well as the guards in their ceremonial clothing who were watching everything. Even the broadcast which announces the liftoff times are exactly the same as before.

"Well, it's fine for you to be happy, but we're still a little too early, no? It will be a while before nine."

"..... I'm reflecting on it. I'll just grab a cup of tea, I guess."

He pointed to the corner of the floor, which consists of food vending machines surrounded by transparent glass. He slotted a coin into the container next to the automatic door, then walked to the drinks section after it opened to allow him in.

"Ara, so you'll have to pay before entering."

"It's self-service and drink-all-you-want, as long as you pay before hand..... Problem is, I don't know what I should choose."

Freshly grounded coffee, branded red tea, or citrus juice. He crossed his arms in hesitation before the table that had a wide array of jars on it. Just then—

"I'll have coffee with a teaspoon of sugar and no cream. That's the best for keeping me awake."

"Ah, Monica. Morning. How was your night?"

"..... Do you think I could sleep last night after knowing that I'll be heading off on a mission in the morning the very next day?"

As she skillfully poured the coffee into a white ceramic container, the girl with sakura-colored hair said with a slight wry smile.

"Let's not talk about that. What are the details of the mission?"

"We'll be heading to the areas near the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> to drive out the electric faeries. We may have to get on the deck of the aircraft. Are you afraid of heights?"

Monica did not answer, but pointed to the ceiling with her index finger instead.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> itself is a extremely tall building with two hundred and ninety one stories, so it is normal to get used to the height if we're working in a place like this — perhaps that was what she was implying.

"Right, Sheltis. I have something to ask you."

As she brought the cup close to her mouth, Monica's gaze shifted upwards.

"Where did you get this mission from?"

"Eh?"

"Aside for a small exception, most of the missions available to cadet-guards will have the takers chosen from a list of squads that volunteered. However, our mission is not listed in the records of the Law Enforcement Bureau. I am quite curious about that."

"Ohh, straight to the point. And you have actually looked it up before hand. That rigid personality of yours is really something—"

Ignoring the praises of the *crystal machine* <Iris>, Monica narrowed her grey eyes into slits.

"Urm..... I don't know how to explain it to you. Actually, I'm not the one who picked this mission up."

Upon being asked that question, Sheltis lifted his head to look at the clock in the shop.

"It's eight-thirty now, which is thirty minutes from the scheduled time..... Leon's a punctual guy, so he should be here soon."

"Who?"

"A fellow member who's doing the mission with us. I think Monica should know him as well."

"Me?"

The girl put on a confused expression. Just then, the mechanized doors of the shop suddenly opened.

Ka..... Came the sounds of shoes stepping onto the hard floors.

The dining area suddenly became dead quiet in an instance, in contrast to the originally lively atmosphere. The clerical staff adjusted their ties, while the guards straightened their backs. Everyone knew that the guy in the white coat was someone who possesses an absolute position in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"Oh, it's Leon. Speak of the devil."

"Ahh. You are unexpectedly punctual, Sheltis."

The silver-haired young man, who had a badge of the Sennenshi hanging from his left arm, said in response. As he walked towards the drinks section, Leon looked at the girl with sakura-colored hair, who was stunned motionless with the cup of coffee in her hands.

"That girl beside you, is she the one whom you told me about yesterday?"

"Yeah, I'll introduce the both of you. This is Monica—"

"W-Wait a second, Sheltis! W-W-Wha..... What's the meaning of this?"

Monica put down the cup of coffee in her hands, then proceeded to shake Sheltis hard by his collar.

"W-Whoa.....! Hey..... Monica, relax for a moment!"

"How do you expect me to relax like this! Why is a Sennenshi - Captain Leon here, and why are you two that familiar with each other!? What's the meaning of this? I originally thought this was just a typical mission—"

"In any case."

Leon said that with a low voice, and directed his sight to an aircraft that was parked in the hanger.

"We'll talk there. This is not the place to be discussing about our mission."

"..... Sorry."

Both Sheltis and Monica nodded obediently and unanimously under the stares of the people around them.

"So I'll summarize this — you and Captain Leon happen to know each other, and he invited you to join in the mission which will most likely involve the Government Sector. Right?"

"Mmm, though it's more of me being forced, rather than invited."

Monica was looking at him suspiciously. Ignoring her sharp gaze that was as if she was trying to see through his everything, Sheltis gave a nod to the Sennenshi next to him.

"Is that right, Leon?"

"Ahh, that's how it is. Your name's Monica, right? Sorry for making you join us all of a sudden, since the mission is rather urgent."

Upon being looked at by the representative great sword wielder of the continent, Monica began to fluster.

"N-No, it's fine! I've always heard about the heroics of Captain Leon..... It is my utmost

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honor to be able to be in the same team as you..... Hey, what are you laughing at, Sheltis?"

"No, it's seldom I get to see Monica in such a flustered state— Ah, just joking! Ouch!"

His stomach was elbowed by her. He quickly retreated backwards, to get away from the furious girl.

Just then, the sounds of moving machines came from his back.

"Seems like everything's in place."

Leon murmured as he looked at the gradually accelerating propellers.

The copper-green shock-absorbent tiled flooring vibrated gently. The lights in the cockpit of the silver aircraft blinked on.

There were fin-like wings on the streamlined chassis. It can carry up to ten people, which is about two times less compared to civilian aircraft.

"It's time, let's go—"

Leon was about to lead the pack, but he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"Hold on. I'm receiving an incoming telepathy message."

Telepathy messages sent via shinryoku.

The only person who would send a telepathy message to a Sennenshi at a time like this is—

"Syun-rei?"

The person who said that name was neither Sheltis himself nor Leon, but Monica, who was originally looking at the aircraft.

"..... Leon."

The doors of the elevator which leads into the indoor airfield opened, and a black-haired girl

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timidly stuck her head out from behind it. She was scanning the whole place, and was obviously relieved when she managed to locate her partner.

"Syun-rei, you came here by yourself?"

"..... I'm really scared, but....."

The Priestess grabbed onto the coat of her exclusive guardian, and stuck onto him without any intention of letting go.

"What's wrong? Something happened?"

"..... No."

The black-haired girl is looking at— me?

"..... Ymy..... she has begun the disciplines of a Priestess."

Syun-rei looked at Sheltis' direction with those deep, transparent black eyes of hers.

"..... So, she asked me to pass this message on to you..... 'Please return safely'."

The single sentence from Ymy—

Syun-rei came all the way to a place which she is afraid of, so that she could pass those words to me?

"..... Because of the mateki..... she couldn't send the message telepathically....."

"_____"

Having heard that, Sheltis could only bite hard on his lips.

Telepathy is a product of shinryoku. Even if Ymy wished to send the message telepathically, Sheltis could not receive it due to the mateki in him. Though there were instances of him receiving telepathy messages earlier, that was actually with the help of the spells that were completed with the aid of Meimel's powers.

She could not transmit the telepathy message. If so, the only thing she could do is ask someone to help pass the message on her behalf.

"..... Thanks. I got it."

"Mmm."

That was the only time when the Priestess showed no fear on her face.

"Sennenshi Leon, and Priestess Syun-rei. Sorry to interrupt, but it is time for us to leave. There are other aircraft that are waiting in line to leave."

Monica informed us with a voice that was more emotionless than usual.

Leon nodded. Syun-rei directed her sight towards the source of the voice—

".....!"

At that instance, the Priestess gave an inaudible cry.

She looked at the girl with sakura-colored hair, with her eyes opening wide in disbelief.

"..... You..... You're....."

"It's been a long time, Priestess Syun-rei. You seem as fine as ever."

Monica stood before the Priestess, lowered her gaze, and calmly offered a bow.

"Syun-rei, do you two know each other?"

"No. It's just that I had received plenty of care from the Priestess in the past."

Monica answered Leon's question. As compared to the shaken Syun-rei, Monica's answer was of the usual stern tone.

"Priestess Syun-rei, I'll be taking my leave, as I am heading out on a mission."

She turned her back towards the Priestess, and made her way to the silver aircraft alone.

The cotton-like clouds appeared beneath them through the pressure-resistant glass. The tower scaling over two thousand meters in height could barely be seen at such a distance as well.

"..... We're finally off the ground. Ah, it should be off the tower."

After ensuring the lighting up of the indicator which signified that the aircraft has entered its predesignated airline, Sheltis stood up from his seat.

"Monica, you can get up and move around now."

"Ahh. The interior of this aircraft is quite luxurious. It's hardly comparable to the aircraft which the guards take during normal missions."

Monica stood up from her seat too, and looked about the cabin.

The floor was covered with expensive carpet, while the seats of the cabin were actually comfortable sofas. There was a huge fridge and dining table at the back, and the fridge was even filled with all sorts of ice-cold drinks.

Forget about the transports of the guards, the interiors of this aircraft is comparable to the first-class cabins of a civilian aircraft.

"There's a Sennenshi on board, so it's not that surprising for such exaggerated treatment."

"Right, where's the person himself?"

"He said 'It's training time' right before the takeoff, and went into another room by himself."

"So he can't even sit down properly during takeoff. That training maniac..... Forget it, I can't be bothered."

He returned to his seat.

"Then again, Sheltis, where are we heading to? Up till now, all I know is that we will be infringing on the airspace of the Government Sector."

"Ah, now that you've reminded me....."

"It's the eighty-seventh airspace located to the north, at about a distance of two thousand meters away from the floating continent. The aircraft has already entered mach speed and is on its scheduled path. If there is no interference on our journey, the journey will take about two and a half to three hours."

"Heh, as expected of Eyrie. So you even know how to pilot an aircraft..... Eh?"

Sheltis blinked his eyes, and rubbed hard on his eyelids.

The person who appeared before him, was the girl in overalls whom he could not be more familiar with.

"Yuto, it's on autopilot, so you can come to the passenger cabin now. Are you thirsty? There should be some fruit juice in the fridge over there."

"Yay— Yuto can drink whatever she likes? Does Shel-nii want a drink as well?"

"Ah, I've just had some back at the shop on the sixty-fifth story..... no wait a second!"

He sprang himself up from his seat after giving out a yell of surprise.

"Why are Eyrie and Yuto here!"

"Why, because I am the captain of this aircraft! And oh, Yuto's the co-pilot."

The girl crossed her arms and answered him as a matter of factly.

"..... Captain?"

"Yup. Yuto said to me sometime ago, 'Eyri-nee, there's someone looking for us', and so we went to the fifty-ninth story of the tower..... It's a place called the Mechanical Bureau, I think? We went to the aviation division there. Once there, I was immediately surrounded by a group of middle-aged men who seemed to be pretty high ranked, and they asked me things like, 'Do you have any experience with flying? How long have you been flying?'. After giving them some answers, I was somehow made the captain of this aircraft."

"Yuto brought you there?"

"Eh?"

Perhaps she was shocked by the sudden mention of her name - Yuto looked at them in confusion with a cup in her hands.

"No, Yuto's not quite sure what happened herself. I think we were stopped by an unknown lady while we were strolling in the tower. Seems like that person used her influence on the Mechanical Bureau and made them assign me as the pilot of this mission. Who is she exactly though? Yuto can't remember as well. I remember her name's Tsa..... something. Does Sheltis have any idea who she may be?"

"That's her name? I can't quite think of anyone with that little information either."

Since they were on an aircraft chartered for Sennenshi Leon, there is no allowance for any incident to happen. The higher-ups of the Mechanical Bureau should have prudently chosen the pilot for the mission - however, there was someone who possessed an absolute power that overrides the decision of the higher-ups, and forcefully assigned an unknown Eyriey into the position instead. Even a Priestess or a Sennenshi may not be able to show such an absolute display of power..... So who exactly was that person?

"That Tsa..... whatever. Does Eyriey know of such a person in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>?"

"How can that be? Yuto said she was a very tall lady with black hair, but that's too little info to work on. Or rather, I don't have a friend in the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> who fits that description."

"..... I guess."

She should not be lying.

Knowing Eyriey's personality, she dislikes hiding things from people. More importantly, he never saw any signs of her being related with the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> for the past two years in *The Two Swans* <Albiero>.

"Eyriey didn't reject them then? Don't you think it's a little too strange?"

"Totally not. For me, this is an excellent chance for me to earn some quick cash. And since I saw your name in the list of passengers, I decided to give it a try."

"..... I see."

Eyriey might not know it, but that group was following the secret orders of the Queen. As such, it is very difficult to imagine them delegating an ordinary person to pilot the aircraft for this mission. But Eyriey..... and there's Yuto too. The two of them joined, which means that there should be someone who agreed to allow them to be part of the mission as well.

— If so, whose idea was it? The Queen's, perhaps?

"Sheltis, why did you suddenly stop talking? Can't we tag along?"

Just as he was thinking about all those questions, Eyriey stuck her head into his sight.

"Ah..... No, that's not what I meant."

He did not understand the reason for such an arrangement. The only unease he had, was the possibility of Eyriey or Yuto getting themselves into some sort of danger.

— Then again, it's not like the two of them can head back to *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> anyway.

"..... Ugh— Though there's still a lot of things to be suspicious about, there's no point in thinking about them for now. I'll leave everything in your care, Captain. Please don't crash the aircraft."

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"How rude— flying an aircraft is way easier than driving an electric vehicle."

Eyriey planted her hands on her waist and puffed her cheeks in anger. Monica, who was looking on from the sides this whole time, suddenly stood up slowly from her seat.

"Sheltis, are they your friends?"

"Yeah, I'll do an introduction. Hmm....."

Just as he was about to speak, Eyriey walked up to Monica by herself.

"Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Eyriey, and somehow I was made the pilot of this aircraft. This girl's Yuto. How about you?"

"Monica. Monica Esperanto. I'll be in your care."

Monica readily shook the outstretched hands of Eyriey.

"..... You fine with this?"

"What's wrong?"

Monica asked in return. Sheltis whispered into her ears,

"Though it is slightly rude for me to be saying this, but don't you feel uneasy for such a girl to be in control of the aircraft, especially when we are in such an important mission?"

"Isn't this fine? It will be the era of female pilots in the future."

The girl crossed her arms and nodded her head in satisfaction.

"..... Seems like you've misunderstood what I'm trying to say. Alright, forget it."

Just then.

"It's pretty noisy outside. What's going on?"

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With his training done a short while ago, a sweaty Leon stuck his head out of the opening of the door.

"Oh, Leon? Thanks for just now. You're done with your training?"

"Yeah. I can't be dragging a tired body around during the missions, can I?"

Eyrie lifted her hand to greet him, while Leon nodded his head in reply.

"Right, how's the piloting of the aircraft?"

"Leave it all to me. It's almost fully automated, so even Yuto will know how to pilot it. Right~?"

"Ya~!"

Eyrie, Yuto and Leon. As he watched the three of them interacting with one another—

..... Hold on, could it be.....?

"Eyrie, so you already know Leon..... that's impossible, right?"

"What are you talking about? Of course we know each other. Moreover, I've already made friends with Syun-rei. She said she'd invite me for tea next time."

Eyrie and Yuto nodded their head calmly.

"Leon, she's telling the truth?"

"Yeah. It happened yesterday during the introduction to the captain of the aircraft."

Leon as the Sennenshi, along with the two Priestesses, Ymy and Syun-rei.

They are people possessing absolute positions in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, and will easily cause uneasiness to just about anyone whom they pass by. However, Eyrie got close to them easily.

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"Somehow, I've discovered a shocking talent of Eyriey's."

"I am deeply impressed with her exceptional communication skills. In contrast, Sheltis is totally like a bad example..... Oops, my tongue slipped."

"You did that deliberately, right!?"

Just as he was about to argue with the *crystal machine* <Iris>.

The alarms on the ceiling released a sharp ear-piercing sound, together with the flashes of red light.

"There's a malfunction to the controls. It's caused by the strong magnetic fields in the nearby airspace..... Seems like they've finally shown themselves. I think we've entered the turf of the electric faeries."

Eyriey released the cup in her hands and stood up quickly.

— Electric faeries.

They are a type of faerie that look like cotton candy, and live within the seas of clouds. Though the amount of charge stored in each individual is weak, they are known to gather in a huge area by the hundreds. If the area overlaps with the aviation route of an aircraft, they will cause malfunctions to the vehicle.

"Right, shall we stick to the original plan?"

"Ahh, please do."

"Understood! Well then, Sheltis and Monica, please return to your seats, and fasten your safety belts."

— Eh?

Sheltis was wondering if he heard the girl's instructions correctly.

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"Leon, ain't we heading to the deck? I mean, we're going to subjugate the electric faeries, so we'll have to hurry. Or else this aircraft won't hold."

"That's fine. The pilot and the manual pilot function has been arranged specially for this reason."

Eyrie said that nonchalantly. Monica was looking from behind with a confused expression as well. She looked out of the aircraft through the windows.

"What's going on?"

"This aircraft is about to deliberately come under the attacks of the electric faeries. Isn't that right?"

The one who answered was the *crystal machine* <Iris>.

"There's a lot of things that don't seem to fit, in regards to our current mission. Though we are entering the airspace of the Government Sector, there's no need for the Sennenshi to leave the side of his Priestess just so he can participate in this mission. On the other hand, this mission is so important that all the Priestesses, including Ymy, knew about it before hand. If so, aside from subjugating the electric faeries, there must be another mission behind this facade. And that is—"

"To investigate the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>."

Leon was the first to take his seat and fasten his seat belt securely.

"Sorry I didn't tell you guys about it sooner. It was the Queen's order not to, so as to prevent the leaking of information. I could only tell you guys that we are on a mission to subjugate the electric faeries, till we have arrived at our destination."

"Ah, I see. That's fine..... But."

Sheltis crossed his arms, and suddenly closed his eyes.

— There was still something which he could not understand.

There's nothing strange about a secret mission hidden behind the front of another mission. It is especially so for the cadet-guards - since they are not viewed as official members of the guards, it's common for them to be hidden from the truth throughout missions. In fact, it's quite rare for them to be informed about the real objectives.

However, Queen Salah had personally ordered Leon to conduct an investigation on the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>?

"Is it really okay to be investigating the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> located in the airspace of the Government Sector? In principle, *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> and the Government Sector will never infringe on each other's airspace. However, the Queen herself is about to break the unwritten rule....."

"I'm not sure. I was only informed of the mission details, but not of the objectives for doing so."

"..... So Captain Leon doesn't know the objectives of this mission either. Is that even possible?"

With her hands touching on the pressure-resistant glass window, Monica turned her head around to look at them. With that, Leon answered in a calm tone,

"I've received only one order - to investigate the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> that's within the airspace of the Government Sector. They may protest us infringing on them, but if we are to stage a crash-landing due to a malfunction, they probably would not blow the matter out of proportion. There's no other orders received other than that. I am also contemplating on what I should be investigating after we arrive on the island."

"Then we don't even have an idea on where to start."

They were instructed to investigate the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>, but they were not told what to investigate.

The person who gave them such an unreasonable request was actually the Queen herself — it

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sounds unbelievable, even if that came straight from Leon's mouth.

"To be honest, I wasn't really eager to accept this mission. One of the reasons is because I'll have to leave Syun-rei by herself in the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. More importantly though, is the fact that this mission is extremely shady. I planned to take a quick look around, then head back to the tower."

"I agree. Well then, how are we going to stage the emergency landing—"

"No worries. Being attacked by the electric faeries is just an excuse that we'll be using on the Government Sector when we return. Since we'll have to cook up a damage report for the aircraft, it's enough for us to receive a single attack from them. There's no need to force a real emergency landing."

"Ahh, that's great. I thought we are gonna make the whole aircraft do a crash landing."

"Stop talking nonsense. Now get back to your seat quickly."

Alright— just as his hand came into contact with the back of his seat.

Zaa A flash of electricity streaked past the other side of the pressure-resistant glass window. It looked like an intimidation from the electric faeries.

"Oh....."

The aircraft shook, and began to tilt. In the next instance, the sirens rang from above the ceilings yet again, along with the flashes of red light.

— Damage report, control functions to the left wing has hit 110% off the normal readings.

— Damage report, abnormality detected in the engines. Reason: electric overload due to high voltages.

"Damage to the wings, as well as stopping the engines. Aside from the warnings on display, she also added in voice warnings. It seems so real."

"Yeah, I never instructed her to make it so real. It's totally similar to the mock training we had

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back in the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>."

Monica was looking out of the windows calmly. As for Leon, he seemed really impressed.

"Sheltis, I heard you know Eyriey from when you were in the living sector?"

"Mmm, we were working together in the living sector. She is really well versed when it comes to machines, to the point where she is on par with the technicians at *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>."

Just then.

Bang — the doors to the captain's cabin opened.

"Ah, Eyriey. We were just talking about your wonderful achievements—"

"....."

Strange? Did she not hear that properly? Eyriey is not responding.

Just as he was thinking that,

"..... Sorry, but I have bad news for everyone here today."

She turned around, and continued speaking.

"Urm— actually, I was overly confident, and I rushed straight into the cluster of electric faeries, and that caused them to get angry. They are currently attacking us in full force, which means—"

"Which means?"

Eyriey closed one of her eyes uncharacteristically and made a face.

"The report on how the aircraft is heading downwards is not a simulation, but they are actually real. Which means, this aircraft will definitely crash..... Ehehe."

"Hold on a second——!?"

Aside from Yuto who was still unaware of their current situation, the rest of the people had all jumped up from their seats.

"..... Ahh, the skies are still as beautiful as ever."

"Eyriey, stop running away from reality! What should we do now?"

"Nothing else but to take a stroll in the sky. Here, take a parachute. Yuto will be coming with me."

After putting a child-parachute onto Yuto, Eyriey secured Yuto's parachute onto her own via a special cable.

"Is it okay for Yuto to be with you? How about leaving her with me instead?"

"What are you talking about? Just leave everything to me. Think about who's the one who made this parachute."

"After hearing that from you, I'm feeling even more uneasy now"

He unwillingly put on the parachute that Eyriey claimed she made. He then took a quick glance at the scenery beneath them through the windows.

The blue skies from a while ago had already disappeared, only to be replaced by an endless stretch of dark green.

It's the destination of their journey — the primeval forests of the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>.

"Well then, get ready."

Eyriey disengaged the escape door to the side of the aircraft.

The doors slowly opened. The winds outside came gushing into the cabin.

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"If we jump now, we should be able to land somewhere on the floating island. Let's meet up with those that are closest to us after we've hit the ground. We'll be heading off, Yuto.

Yaaahoo—!"

"Yahoo—!"

Eyrie and Yuto jumped off the aircraft with an excited cry.

Their bodies appeared smaller and smaller..... suddenly, a bright orange parachute appeared. Upon seeing the two of them slowly floating downwards like a dandelion, Sheltis couldn't help but slap his chest in relief.

"That's great. So long as the parachute can open safely, both of them should be fine."

"Alright, you're next, Sheltis."

—Eh?

Before he could even prepare himself, Sheltis was given a hard kick on his back



"Leon—— You better remember this———!"

Sheltis made his endless plunge down from the blue skies, head first towards the ground.

Floating Archipelagos <Lagoon>.

A cluster of islands that float around the floating continent. Their sizes ranged from that of a house, to those spanning several kilometers. Should an island be large enough, it can be used to construct electric windmills or research labs. However, due to the varying differences in the ecology as well as the geology of each individual island, the usage of large islands will be restricted to those which humans can develop.

"..... An island covered by primeval forests huh."

After taking a glance at the large trees that were around him, Leon pinched a bit of the soil off from the ground.

The dark brown soil felt slightly damp. It's the moist soil unique to the forests.

"No volcanic ash, and no gravel. Only soil. I see."

He flashed a strange smile with the corner of his lip, then turned around to face the girls behind him.

"I'm basically done with things over here. How about you?"

"I've already located them both, though they are of a considerable distance away from us."

The girl in overalls lifted her head - she was carrying a small boxed transmitter in her arms. Next to her, stood a black-haired girl who was staring intently at the screen of the transmitter.

"It seems like Sheltis and Monica are together. They're somewhere to our west, a few hundred meters away from us in a straight line. Though strictly speaking, that's the location of the transponders in their parachutes. If they moved somewhere else, then I won't know their exact location.

"That's more than enough."

After taking a look at the parachute on the ground, Leon redirected his gaze back at Eyrie.

"I don't know if you remember, but I saw a huge crevasse before landing."

"I did, I did! It's that large crevasse, right? We'd be goners if we fell inside it."

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It's a huge crevasse that splits the floating island in two.

After analyzing the positions displayed on Eyriey's transmitter, they themselves should be located on the east side of the crevasse, while Sheltis and Monica should be located on the west. The two groups were separated by the crevasse.

"We'll have to go around the crevasse if we want to meet up with them. Looks like there will be quite a bit of distance for us to cover."

"Yuto and I are fine with it. Right, Yuto!"

"Yup— Eyri-nee!"

"That's really dependable. Let's go."

After confirming the location of the sun above him, he began to make his way northwards into the primeval forest.

Their destination was the black smoke that can be seen through the gaps of the huge trees. That was the crash landing site of their aircraft. Sheltis should be heading there as well. Due to them passing by electromagnetic fields of the electric faeries earlier, the functions of the badges had become rather unstable, and therefore he could not use it to send an electronic mail to Sheltis.

Thus, the only thing he could do is to bet on the possibility that both groups will meet up on the crash landing site later.

"Oh right. You said, 'I see' after touching the soil on the ground. What did you mean by that?"

"It's this."

Leon did not slow down his footsteps even at the sudden question posed by Eyriey. Instead, he pointed next to his feet with the fingers on his right hand.

"There's no volcanic ash, no gravel or boulders. Geologically speaking, it is exactly the same as Orbie Clar."

"Mhmm."

"Next, I see no signs of huge beasts running about. I saw a few winged insects flying by, but I guess that's just about all there is to this island."

"Ohh..... and?"

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"Don't you think this island is extremely suitable to be used for the construction of electric windmills, research labs, and etc? If the grounds consist of volcanic ash or gravel, then it would be too weak to support any buildings. On the other hand, an island made of solid boulders would be too hard for any penetration to take place. Therefore, the conditions on this island are perfect for the development of humans."

An excellent ground condition.

If there are no ground dragons or harmful beasts about, then it would be abnormal for people not to utilize this island.

"However, there are no signs of development on this island at all. If there are rare creatures that live here, then the whole island should be listed as a protected island, and recorded on the map of the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>."

He opened up the aerial map he brought from *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, and passed it to Eyriey.

"Ah, is it the same as what I got from the Mechanical Bureau?"

"Probably. This is the latest version of the aerial map released by the Government Sector."

The airspace owned by the Government Sector is marked in red, while the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> are portrayed using black dots.

As it will be impossible for them to show every single island, in accordance to the guidelines for map labeling, the maps will only show the locations of protected islands or islands with facilities built on them.

"You saw it on the aircraft as well - this island is not registered on the aerial map. Meaning, it's neither a protected island, nor is it an island that humans had stepped onto before."

A floating island with pristine conditions for development.

However, it's not recorded on the maps of the Government Sector.

"So what you're trying to say is..... why is the Government Sector leaving such an excellent island unattended? That's what you're most curious about, right?"

"That is all but my conjecture."

However, it should not be too far away from the truth. If so, there is a

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reasonable explanation as to why the Queen is unwilling to clarify the objectives of the mission.

"You two, be on alert. There's something strange about this island."

"Ah— Leon that bastard, he pisses me off! What's with him kicking me off the aircraft!"

Sheltis removed the crumpled parachute off from his back, and brushed away the leaves on his body.

After being booted off the aircraft, he fell headfirst into the primeval forest. Though he barely managed to get the parachute open, he crashed straight into the branches, resulting in his body getting covered with leaves.

"We're lucky to be still alive."

Next to him was Monica carefully folding up the parachute.

"It seems like we're the only two around here. We're left with Captain Leon..... and Eyriey plus Yuto, right? I hope they're alright."

"Yeah. Leon's a strong fella - I think he'll be fine even if he jumps off the aircraft without a parachute. The only problem are with Eyriey and Yuto. I think they should have met up with Leon already."

"Why do you think so?"

Sheltis pointed to the parachute in her arms in response to her question.

There was a black rectangular device on the straps. A green light in the middle was flashing on and off continuously, as though it was giving off a signal.

"A transponder?"

"Eyriey said she's the one who made these parachutes. She's a person who loves transponders and transmitters the most. I guess she had initially made the transponders, then attached them to the parachutes later so she could conduct some tests on it."

"..... That's quite something."

Monica laughed wryly as she looked at the transponders with a slightly dumbfounded

expression.

"If so, the two girls should have headed out to find Leon, and have probably met up already. Also, they should have located our position as well. Why don't we wait for the three of them here, instead of moving about randomly?"

"Mmm— that's a tough choice we have here."

Sheltis crossed his arms and pressed his finger against his forehead, as he tried recalling the terrain of the island.

"I remember seeing a giant crevasse to the east as we fell. Their parachutes should have floated past there and landed on the other side of the crevasse."

If they were to wait at their current location, then the three people will have to get by the huge crevasse. However, those people consist of Eyrie and Yuto too.

"Leon is obviously fine, but will it be a good idea to make the two ordinary girls walk within the primeval forests for a long time..... I see, I did not consider things deeply enough. To lessen their burden, it will be better for us head in their direction to meet up."

"Precisely."

He removed the transponder from the parachute and slotted it into a small bag. With that, Eyrie would know that they were on the move as well.

"Seems like everything's been decided already."

Monica looked towards the north, where a black column of smoke was rising upwards into the sky.

That was the location where their aircraft had crashed into. As it is too far away, they could not pinpoint its exact location. However, it should have avoided the crevasse and crashed somewhere in between their location and Leon's.

"We'll reach the crash site if we follow the black smoke. I think Captain Leon can see that as well, so it should be the perfect place to meet up — I believe they will be thinking of the same thing too."

"I'm quite worried, so let's head off immediately."

"Right. Even with Captain Leon around, they are still your ordinary citizens."

Seeing how serious Monica was, Sheltis laughed wryly to himself.

"The person who I'm worried about is Leon."

In many different ways.

"La～ La～ Lalala～ Lala～ La～"

"Whoa— we're hiking, Eyri-nee! This is fun!"

"....."

"Mmm— it's not bad to be in a place full of nature. We didn't manage to have our barbecue meat the last time we were at the nature sector. It should be fine if we changed the location to here, right?"

"Yuto wants to eat meat—"

"..... Can the both of you maintain a bit of tension here?"

Leon stopped in his tracks and said exasperatedly.

"Eh, but of course we do. We are already thirty percent more serious than usual. Right, Yuto?"

"Yup— Eyri-nee."

The girls held hands together and nodded at each other harmoniously.

..... Is this a new method of torture?

Perhaps he's already used to the normally quiet Syun-rei, but he would be very alert should there be any movements around him. However, the most painful thing about this was that he could not ignore the two behind him.

"Whatever. It's better than them not being able to walk due to fatigue."

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After switching his viewpoint on things, Leon continued walking.

— Is that where the problem lies?

Beneath the shelters of the dark brown canopy, the sunlight was getting weaker as they walked deeper into the primeval forests. As of now, they could not even see their own shadows on the ground.

"Ouch!"

Suddenly, the scream of a girl came from behind him.

"..... It hurts!"

"Eyri-nee fell? Are you okay?"

Eyriey had totally fallen forward onto the ground. Yuto was looking at her worriedly by her side.

"Are you alright?"

"..... Mmm, I tripped."

Eyriey brushed the soil off her knees.

She pointed to a large jutting root on the ground. It seemed like the primeval forest is rather ancient, as the surrounding trees are all over ten meters high. Since the roots are as thick and big as boulders, one may fall or sprain their feet should they trip on them.

That's not all. The roots had spread all over the ground like a web, it will be difficult for them to clear it if they wanted to.

"Alright..... I can move now. Let's go."

The girl in overalls stood up unsteadily. Upon seeing the worried Yuto, she squeezed a smile that says 'I'm okay'. Just then—

"Don't move."

Ignoring her reactions, Leon lifted up Eyriey in a single move. With that, he piggy-backed the girl who had her eyes widened, and resumed his walk nonchalantly.

"Whoa! I'm being carried by a guy? Whoa— what's with this touched feelings that I've never

experienced before!"

"Hey, stop fooling around."

He raised his voice to silence the girl who was getting noisy yet again.

"Even Sheltis has never piggy-backed me before, you know. He allows Yuto to ride on his shoulders, but he said I was too tall. Therefore, I'm slightly moved here."

"That guy's too weak physically. Don't you worry, I'll train him properly."

Leon moved forward one step at a time, while avoiding the roots on the ground and the branches above his head.

"Are you alright by yourself?"

"Yuto's okay— this place is fun!"

The black-haired girl leapt between the roots of the trees happily.

..... Seems like I don't have to carry two people at once.

While surrounded by the trees around them, Leon lead the two hyperactive girls deeper and deeper into the forest.

"Hachoo!"

The young man's sneeze echoed through the quiet forest.

"Why did you sneeze suddenly?"

"..... Feels like someone was talking about me."

And it is definitely some baseless gossip. There's definitely nothing good coming out of that.

"Captain Leon?"

Monica, who was walking beside him, showed a half-surprised expression as she laughed wryly.

"Damn him."

As he heaved a long sigh, Sheltis ducked past the protruding branches.

..... Seems like it will take some time.

The place they were originally at seemed to be an area with less trees. They could initially see the skies above, but right now it was obscured by the dark brown leaves above them.

Beneath their feet were roots that were as hard as rocks, while above their heads were sharp branches jutting out. With no proper roads paved out on the ground, the two of them could only make their way forward by avoiding the obstacles above and below them.

"We've indeed made the right choice by trying to meet up with them. This sort of terrain is just too difficult for them to navigate."

"Yeah. Leon's as good as a dog when it comes to sniffing out things like this, so he'll probably provide them with plenty of rest along the way, instead of rushing the girls to meet up with us..... But yeah, it's really difficult to navigate through this forest."

Despite him being strict on himself, Leon will never hesitate to show his concern towards his subordinates or the weak. That's the sort of man the silver-haired swordsman is. That is also perhaps one of the reasons why the anthropophobic Syun-rei opens her heart to him.

"Do you and Captain Leon always act like that?"

He could feel Monica looking at him from the sides, as though she had suddenly thought of something.

"Like what?"

"I can't really say if you two get along well or not, but it just feels rather unbelievable."

Monica stared at Sheltis' face seriously. His expressions suggested that he was in a rather pleasant mood.

"When Captain Leon kicked you off the aircraft, I originally thought that there was some bad feelings between the both of you..... but when I thought about it later, the reason Captain Leon wants you to be in this mission is probably because he holds you in high regards. You said that he's 'as good as a dog when it comes to sniffing' - it may look like you are insulting Captain Leon, but I can see that you hold a lot of faith in him."

"Well, we have been rivals since way back."

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He pried open the branches that were about to poke into his eyes, and continued walking forward.

"I told you before, we already knew each other before entering the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. We competed against each other back then to see who could be a Sennenshi first. In the end, Leon's a Sennenshi now, while I'm still a cadet-guard."

"..... I am envious of you two."

Monica gently leaped past the root before her.

"You're envious?"

"Unlike you, I do not have any friends whom I've known for a long time in the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>."

And then.

"Ever since I started my training as an apprentice-Priestess, I've always been alone."

The footsteps of his suddenly stopped.

— Monica?

"Apprentice-Priestess..... you are referring to the girls on the floating continent who are selected to become candidates of a Priestess?"

Ymy had once walked down that path as well.

On the floating continent, right after a baby is born, they will have their absolute shinryoku strength measured by a special machine. For girls who possesses shinryoku of strength past a certain threshold, they will be chosen to be an apprentice-Priestesses, and train in the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> since young.

In the living sector, it is considered an absolute honor to be selected as one of the apprentice-Priestesses. That's because that is the only way for the girls to become a Priestess that represents the whole floating continent.

"However, I'm just someone who was rejected at the very end..... A failure who can't become a real Priestess."

Monica resumed walking with a dry smile on her face.

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"Hold on a second. You just said 'someone who was rejected at the very end', right? The so called 'very end', means that you managed to go all the way to the final test in the Grand Holy Hall?"

"I think so. They were about to select the new Priestess out of the three people left."

Having known the truth, Sheltis was at a loss for words.

..... Then isn't that really amazing?

There are up to a thousand apprentice-Priestesses. However, it is said that the majority of them will give up that honorable position willingly after a year into their training.

It's because the training is way too tough.

"I am not too sure about the details, but is the training really that tough?"

"I was brought into the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> at seven years old, and I had underwent training for about eight years..... I loitered between the borders of life and death for about half of the time. I was encased within ice under a fully awake condition, so as to be in a state of suspended animation — that was the very first training I underwent, just so I can endure the freezing temperatures of Hyouketsu Kyoukai. Even so, that is probably the easiest training for us. As for the training after that..... I don't even want to think about it."

Kra The girl stepped on a fallen branch, and continued walking.

After looking at her back and that sakura-colored hair of hers for a while, Sheltis finally moved himself and caught up with her.

"As for the final test three years ago, after listening to the instructions at a place called the Grand Holy Hall, the other two selected ones and I were brought to the highest story of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>."

The two hundred and ninety-first story of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>, the highest floor named <<Paradise>>.

That is the actual place where the Queen and her Priestesses pray for Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

"Do you know what's the final test to be a Priestess?"

"..... No."

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"It's simple - we have to maintain the barriers of Hyouketsu Kyoukai alone. Being able to do that or not will decide if we are qualified to be a Priestess..... and I did not manage to do it."

After a slight pause, she squeezed out her voice yet again.

"Though it may sound strange for me to be saying this as a failure, it would not be surprising for any one of the three to be chosen as a Priestess. In fact, there were people who viewed me as a favorite to become a Priestess. However, I failed in the very last test, and I quit my position as an apprentice-Priestess the very same day."

"..... This may be a strange question, but perhaps it was just you not being at your prime that day? Since you were an apprentice who made your way all the way to the final test, you may have passed it on your very next attempt."

"There's something that even the training can't help with."

"It's the absolute strength of your shinryoku."

The silent *crystal machine* <Iris> seemed to have noticed what she was talking about, and continued speaking,

"Shinryoku is a power in the form of waves. The more stable the shape of the waves, the better one is suited for barrier-type spells; the shorter the wavelengths, the better it will be for territorial-type spells like telepathy and far-sight. The disciplines of a Priestess focus on strengthening these two areas - in other words, it is to stabilize the waves so they will be smooth flowing, and to increase the speed between each wave cycle. However, there's a property of the waves that is extremely difficult to improve via training, and that is—"

"The 'amplitude' of the waves, which is the absolute strength of shinryoku..... The strength of my shinryoku is not enough for me to maintain Hyouketsu Kyoukai till the end. That was when I was fifteen."

She stared into her own palms.

In order to make up for the lack of power in her shinryoku, she had trained hard in spells of other disciplines to make her way to the final test. However, that was still not enough for her to overcome her handicap.

"The person who managed to pray for Hyouketsu Kyoukai for twenty-four hours straight during the final test, is the current Fourth Priestess — Syun-rei Pia Nucclene."

"..... You..... You're....."

"It's been a long time, Priestess Syun-rei. You seem as fine as ever."

So that was the reason for Syun-rei, who was a Priestess, to flinch at a low-ranking cadet-guard back then.

"..... I see, so that's how it is."

The two of them were not only rivals, but companions who underwent countless harsh training together.

When Monica, who was an apprentice-Priestess just like her, reappeared before her as her subordinate, Sheltis could easily imagine the shock that Syun-rei must have felt.

"Pardon my rudeness, but were you sick of being an apprentice-Priestess after your unsuccessful attempt to be a Priestess?"

Despite the polite tone, the *crystal machine* <Iris> had undoubtedly asked Monica something that was extremely personal.

"I do know you are slightly lacking in terms of your shinryoku. However, since you possess the abilities to make it all the way to the final test, your capabilities in terms of the arts of shinryoku should be faultless. Even if you can't become a Priestess, you should be more than capable of taking up an important position to develop and train the other apprentice-Priestesses, right?"

The question voiced by the *crystal machine* <Iris> made sense.

Anyone who's skilled with shinryoku can easily get a job in the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. However, she chose to forsake all of that, and became a cadet-guard instead.

"After being an apprentice-Priestess for eight years, it should not be easy for you to change your class to be a guard, who focuses on their physical capabilities instead. As a machine, I cannot comprehend your reason for choosing such a difficult path."

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"..... Back when I was still an apprentice-Priestess, there was a young man who was a guard, whom I admired. That's all there is to it."

She replied rather embarrassingly.

The girl began to recall the days with a nostalgic voice,

"That teenage boy woke up earlier than anyone else, so as to swing his swords alone by himself. Even after I was done with the training of an apprentice-Priestess, he was still there practicing..... The scene of him working hard relentlessly gave me a lot of support. I hoped to become someone like him. Therefore, when I knew I could not become a Priestess, I decided to be a guard instead."

The morning practice by himself, as well as the training given by the instructor during the day.

Even at night, he was silently working on his swordsmanship alone while everyone else was sound asleep. After coming up with an estimation of the hours spent on training, Sheltis unconsciously let out a cry of surprise.

"That's a really crazy amount of training we're talking about. That guy must have trained on his own accord even after training in the day."

— Who exactly is he?

There's only Leon and himself who trained like that, like a pair of idiots. If there's anyone else who did something like that, he should have an impression of him as well.

"He's a really impressive person. That twin sword wielder became the cadres guard of the executive rank at the young age of fourteen..... but that was already some years ago. I still remember hearing the news of him falling to his death into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> while he was on a mission. I couldn't sleep because of the shock after that."

"——*cough*!"

"Hey..... what's with the sudden coughing?"

"B-Because..... ah, whoa!"

Sheltis fell headfirst onto the ground as he tripped on a root.

"Sheltis, that's quite embarrassing of you."

"..... Mind sparing a thought for me?"

With his limbs lying flat on the ground, Sheltis closed his eyes and took in a deep breathe.

..... I see.

..... Indeed, there's only one such person.

A twin sword wielder who became a cadres guard at the age of fourteen, and that crazy amount of training. That's right, regardless of how huge *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> is, there's still only one guy who fulfills those conditions.

..... He's the me three years ago.

He could never imagine that, not even in his dreams.

Aside from Ymy, there was someone else who was paying attention to such a low-ranking person like him.

"So, the reason for you showing me the way back then....."

"Ahh. I hope you don't mind, but..... because..... you looked really similar to him, so I just couldn't leave you by yourself."

Monica's face was blushing slightly. She turned her face away with an embarrassed expression.

"D-Don't misunderstand! I have no intention of comparing you to him. And it's not like I wouldn't help you if you didn't look like him. No matter what, I wouldn't leave a helpless cadet-guard alone."

"Mmm, I get it."

Even if he was not the one who was lost, she would definitely lend the person a helping hand. It just so happens that he looked like 'the young man whom she admired'.

..... Well of course. I am the person himself.

He heaved a breathe that was neither a sigh nor a bitter laugh.

— I definitely cannot say it. I cannot tell her that I am the person from back then.

That was the conclusion he had reached with the *crystal machine* <Iris>, before coming here.

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And since she knew about him falling into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>, that's even more reason for him not to tell. The upper brass of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> did not wish for anyone else to know about them allowing someone with mateki in his body to reenter the palace. Should that fact be made public knowledge, there will be a high possibility that he will be forcefully expelled from the palace. In the worse situation, he may even implicate Monica as well.

"..... The skies are becoming dark."

The skies covered by the leaves. The originally blue skies that filtered through the gaps within had unknowingly became the red of the setting sun, then turning into the grey of twilight. Along with the change in colors of the skies, the small column of black smoke emitted from the aircraft was gradually blending into its surrounding as one.

"The smoke is almost not visible already."

Monica said as she peered into the northern direction of the skies while narrowing her eyes.

"It will be too dangerous for you two to explore an unknown floating island at night, especially when we are talking about an uncharted forest like this one, since the ecosystem of the day will be totally different from that of the night. I advise you two to start a fire and rest here for the night."

"You're right. I was planning to look for a more open area though."

Tall trees with scales-like barks stood erected all around them.

"I guess we'll have to compromise."

After finding a flat boulder to sit down on, Monica suddenly lifted her head to look into the sky. She was looking at the grayish setting sun that was located on the other side of the dense branches.

"..... There's no clouds. If we weren't in such a dense forest, then we would be able to see the starry skies of the night. What a shame."

Pa..... Pa..... The sounds of crackling sparks of fire.

Under the swaying illumination of the red flames, one could see the faint outlines of the forest in the night.

"Whoa— it's a campfire, Eyri-nee!"

"Mmm— it's pretty good. I feels quite excited to be able to camp outside at a place like this."

The two girls played with each other by circling around the campfire.

"How's your feet?"

"Mmm, thanks to you, it seems to be almost recovered. I should be able to walk by myself tomorrow."

"That's great then."

Eyrie patted her own knees. Under the influence of their cheerful disposition, Leon's expressions had gradually softened as well.

..... It's been a long time since he had enjoyed that sort of mood.

Though there were several occasions where he camped outdoors like this while he was on missions, the other members were all very restrained under the presence of a Sennenshi, and none of them dared to talk actively. That might be the correct way in which they should act, but in the end, isn't that one of the reasons that caused distrust among the members in the squad — such thoughts appeared in Leon's mind occasionally.

"Eyrie, I heard you first met that guy back in the living sector?"

"You mean Sheltis? Mmm, it's the same with Yuto too. Both of us worked together in the same cafe."

"Working in a cafe huh..... that's not quite like him."

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Leon couldn't help but laugh as he imagined the look of Sheltis in an apron.

"His tasks were mainly to be an errand boy, as well as testing Chef's new dishes for poison — from what I saw, it seemed like he was enjoying it a lot."

Eyrie sat on a huge protruding root which she found.

"Oh right, I have a question as well. Sheltis mentioned before that he had once competed with you to see who will be a Sennenshi first, right? But Leon's already a Sennenshi."

"And then?"

"In the eyes of a senior, do you think Sheltis has what it takes to be a Sennenshi? Can he become Ymy's guardian? Because you see, won't his mateki repel the shinryoku of a Priestess?"

"..... I'm surprised. You know quite a lot of things."

"Ehehe, I'm on very good terms with Ymy as well. We've agreed to meet up to play some time soon."

..... It's no wonder she knew about the things related to Sheltis and Ymy.

That may be proof that she has already gained a huge amount of trust from those two people.

"So, what are your thoughts?"

"Well, he reached the cadres rank three years ago. Even if we were to take only his swordsmanship into consideration, no one would oppose him rising up by several ranks in one go."

Aside from his swordsmanship, the thing that is of worth mentioning is the strong mateki that exists in his body. As a young man who has acquired powers similar to those of a Yuugenshu, he is able to utilize the mateki in him to ignore the barriers of the Yuugenshu. If they were to talk about the advantages he has when it comes to fighting Yuugenshu, he is probably among the top few people within the whole of *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"Hmm, there's no problems then?"

"— No."

Contrary to the girl who was nodding her head, Leon rejected her claims with a brief shake of his head.

"This is something I've experienced myself. The current him is just exactly like how I was back then..... he cannot understand something, which is: the reason a Priestess is assigned their exclusive Sennenshi."

"Eh? Isn't the Sennenshi the guardian of the Priestesses?"

"There's another reason behind it. Syun-rei only told me about it much later."

He tossed the dried branches into the camp fire, and watched the dancing sparks of fire.

"I don't quite get it. Can't Ymy just tell Sheltis what he's lacking?"

"It's very hard. The relationship between the two of them is still currently at the stage of 'childhood friends', so not even Ymy can tell him about it. Sheltis is generally slow when it comes to these things. If there is no one to tell him about it, then he won't be able to realize it by himself..... I'm sorry, but I can't be the one to tell him about these things either."

As he listened to the crackles of the fire, Leon shut his eyes temporarily.

"It only there is someone close to him who understands the true feelings of a Priestess."

Pa..... Pa.....

The sparks of fire fluttered in the air, and disappeared before reaching the ground. Before their eyes was a simple campfire made from stacked branches and a bottom layer of leaves.

"_____"

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Sitting on a heap of leaves that was laid out onto the ground, Sheltis leaned himself against a tree. He hugged his knees with both of his arms, and secretly stared at the girl sitting in front of him.

Monica was sitting behind the campfire.

"You can't sleep?"

She moved her lips, but not her gaze.

"It's my turn to be on guard now. Or could it be that you're not confident in my abilities?"

"Nothing of the sort..... it's just me being unable to sleep."

"Really."

With that, the girl sank into silence yet again. Amid the quietness around them, the only signs of time flowing was the swaying of the flames as well as the crackling sparks of fire.

..... It's really hard to be in a team.

With his arms still hugging his knees, Sheltis lifted his head.

How much distance should he maintain between his teammates and himself? He should not infringe on the privacy of others, but talking about pointless things won't yield meaningful results either.

Thinking back to three years ago, it was due to him frequently teaming up with Leon that they could always argue or crack some jokes with each other.

"This is probably how things really are out there."

"..... Mmm."

It is rare for teammates to consist of members who are incredibly skilled and whom you share deep ties with - just like how Leon is to Sheltis. Miscommunication frequently occurs within a team, or some teammates may actually be pulling the others down. Moreover, it is common

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for teams to fail in their missions.

It's until now when he's in a two-man team with a female partner, that he had finally realized something: that it is extremely difficult to work together with the members of your team.

"Since you're not sleeping yet, can I ask you something?"

With her *crossed rods* <Rosario> placed next to her hands, Monica asked Sheltis that as she stared at the campfire. You don't have to answer if you don't want to — she added in that line before voicing her question.

"Since you know Captain Leon, does that mean you're aiming to be a Sennenshi as well?"

"..... You can put it that way."

"Do you have any definite reasons for wanting to be a Sennenshi? A reason for you to want to be a Sennenshi, regardless of all odds."

"I've promised a Priestess, that I'd definitely protect her."

For a moment, Monica looked at him with widened eyes. After a long while—

"..... If you say that during the interview at the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, the examiners would probably be dumbfounded."

With that, it seemed like she could no longer endure it, and finally let out a soft laughter.

"I did say it, and they mocked me for quite a bit."

"But of course. The way you put it, it sounds like you are very close to one of the Priestesses or something."

..... It will be better for me not to tell her that I am Ymy's childhood friend.

I'll only be causing trouble for Ymy if I were to tell others about our relationship.

"Urm, it's rude of me to be laughing like that. Sorry..... It's just, I never thought you'd say

something like that."

Monica turned her face to the side, as though to hide her laughter on the corner of her lips from him.

"Ah, I feel the same too."

"..... I am very embarrassed about it too, okay. Can we stop talking about this already? It feels really shameful."

He tossed a small pebble into the campfire, and watched the paths of the exploding sparks of fire.

"But Sheltis, is that your main reason? What about others?"

"There should be nothing else."

He shook his head at the next question. If Ymy didn't become a Priestess, he definitely wouldn't have walked the path of a guard. That was all there is to it.

However—

"I just want to remind you of something..... I'm not trying to deny your reason, I'm just hoping that you can remember this. I'm not saying this as a cadet-guard, but as someone who was once an apprentice-Priestess. My real feelings."

He could detect a strong sense of determination in her words.

"If I was a Priestess, I would definitely not choose someone who only wants to protect the Priestess as a Sennenshi."

"..... Why is that?"

"Because for that sort of person, it's just about as good as not understanding the Priestesses at all."

Her words cleaved through the tense atmosphere. With a calm tone, the girl who was once an

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apprentice-Priestess voiced out that harsh criticism.

"Other than fighting the Yuugenshu, what else do you think are the foes that a Priestess must battle against for a whole of twenty-four hours, even during her rest?"

"..... Foes?"

"It's pain and burdens."

Perhaps she was thinking about herself in the past - the girl pressed her right hand against her chest.

"The Priestesses have never once rested mentally. Before becoming a Priestess — before the age of ten, she will have to cry and endure the painful training of encasing herself in ice..... When night falls, they will be near the brink of collapse just by recalling the training back in the day."

Monica's hands were trembling slightly.

She was in such fear just by reminiscing the training in the past — after seeing that sort of reaction from her, he could better understand the sort of hardships she had went through.

"After becoming a Priestess, there will be a more painful burden awaiting her - the important responsibility of protecting the floating continent. That is obviously so when they are maintaining Hyouketsu Kyoukai. But aside from that, whenever there are reports of Yuugenshu sighted, they will have to be ready to move out regardless of the condition of their body. Moreover, they will have to be in the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> for most of the time to be on standby, and thus have very little chance to see the world outside of the tower. That sort of life is just like being in a prison..... but they take it all quietly, without any complaints."

Day after day of painful training, as well as the burden of maintaining Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

The ordinary people in the living sector will never understand the pains of the Priestesses. That is because the Priestesses hide their pains behind the masks of a smiling face.

"The Priestesses who live on the top floors of the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> are alone. In order to protect the floating continent, they have devoted their whole lives to training and

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the maintenance of the barrier. However, who will be the ones to save them from their suffering?"

"Well....."

Facing the questioning gaze of Monica, Sheltis could barely squeeze out a reply.

The other Priestesses cannot do that. The most the Priestesses can do is to share the pain of each other. If there is anyone who can erase their pains and sufferings, then they will have to be those who are always by the sides of the Priestesses—

"..... Sennenshi?"

"Yes. A Sennenshi cannot just protect a Priestess. Only when a person can fully understand the pain and loneliness of a Priestess' training, as well as understand the importance of reducing those emotions, will he be qualified to take on the role of a Sennenshi."

The true feelings of a girl who wanted to be a Priestess but failed. A girl who understands the Priestesses better than anyone else.

..... It is indeed like what she says.

There's no denying it. Everything is as what Monica had said.

"If so, then the combination of Leon and Syun-rei is really perfect."

Sheltis nodded his head in agreement with what the *crystal machine* <Iris> had said.

It's not just protecting the Priestess from the harms of the Yuugenshu. It's precisely due to the assistance and the constant support of the brave Leon by her side, that the shy and introvert Syun-rei can entrust herself fully to him, and focus on praying for Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

If Monica is to become a Sennenshi, she will definitely do the same as well.

As a person who understands the pain and suffering of a Priestess better than anyone else, she can definitely accompany them by their side and erase all their discomfort.

— Then what about me?

— All I'm thinking of is to be with Ymy.

— Can the me in the past really understand the sufferings of a Priestess?

He shut his eyes for a while, and listened to the sounds around him.

And then.

"..... It's really far away."

When he opened his eyes once again, Sheltis was already lying on his back.

"..... Sheltis?"

"Thank you, Monica. I've always misunderstood things. Perhaps it's true that I really don't understand the things between a Priestess and her Sennenshi."

His sword rival Leon is a Sennenshi, while his childhood friend Ymy is a Priestess. As he is stuck in the middle of the two, he had unknowingly took the existence of a Sennenshi and a Priestess for granted.

"Now, I finally understand how far the position of a Sennenshi is away from me."

He stretched his hands towards the night skies that were peeking through the gaps of the leaves.

The far and endless sphere of the sky. The Priestesses and Sennenshi are at a similar distance above him.

..... I'm sorry, Ymy.

..... All I wanted to do was protect Ymy, but I never knew you were under such pain and suffering this whole time.

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If she was still an apprentice-Priestess, then perhaps his wish of 'being together with her' would suffice.

However, for Ymy who has already become a Priestess, those vague thoughts of his are far from enough. The simple reason of him being her 'childhood friend' is not enough for him to be by her side supporting her.

"..... I definitely can't do it by myself."

Three years ago, he had a strong companion in the form of Leon, which caused him not to notice the difficulties and cruel truths behind heading out and completing missions together with teammates.

However, without those bits and pieces of experience, he will never become a Sennenshi in the future.

Because if he cannot even protect his teammates, he will naturally not be able to protect a Priestess. And those who cannot communicate with their teammates will definitely not understand the sufferings of a Priestess.

— That is what was lacking in me three years ago.

"I'm sorry for disturbing your rest time."

Monica suddenly lowered her gaze.

"But I really do hope you can understand that. You're different from me - there's a high chance of you becoming a regular guard. After seeing how you will be scaling up the positions in the future, I can't help but tell you all that."

Different from me?

At that instance, Sheltis quickly propped his upper body off the ground, as though there was a spring beneath him.

"Monica? Isn't your reason for joining the team to be a regular guard?"

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"I've said it ever since the beginning. Regardless of being a guard or a Priestess, I'm just a failure."

She did say that during their first true conversation as well.

"Ever since failing the final test to become a Priestess, my body will become stiff and immobile whenever I face something important..... I think it's probably due to this scar within me that hasn't been totally healed yet."

A psychological scar that has yet to be fully healed.

Pressing against her chest with her left hand, Monica gave a self-deprecating laugh.

"I am a clumsy woman who fails whenever I am needed the most. I am a well known failure among all the cadet-guards, so which squad will ever accept me? Therefore, I'll forever—"

"You can definitely do it."

Sheltis interrupted her with that sentence.

He looked intently into her.

"Monica, you are always practicing on your *crossed rods* <Rosario> by yourself in the middle of the night, right?"

"That's because..... I'm originally an apprentice-Priestess, and my physical capabilities are not on par with the other cadet-guards."

"It's fine, we'll definitely complete this mission successfully."

"Why are you so sure of that?"

Don't say things as though it's that easy — it's like the sharp gaze of Monica was trying to tell him that.

"Because there's me."

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That was the only answer from Sheltis.

There was no reason or argument - instead, his sincerity was more than enough to fill up the gaps of those two missing elements.

"Though I still don't quite understand our current mission, I'll definitely ensure that it ends up successful. Don't worry, no matter what happens, I'll definitely be at your side assisting you."

They looked into each other's eyes through the flickering flames.

After a long while.

"You're a naively optimistic idiot."

Monica turned her face away. A hint of smile appeared on the corner of her lips.

"That's his only good point anyway."

"..... Monica and Iris, are you two praising me or looking down on me?"

"What do you think? Still, I'll be in your care for tomorrow as well."

She hugged her knees with her arms, and said that while lowering her gaze.

It's time for them to switch shifts. Sheltis will be guarding from now on until dawn comes.

Amid the silent sea of trees.

"Isn't that great. Your originally obscured objectives have finally become clear."

After confirming that Monica's breath signaled that she was asleep, the *crystal machine* <Iris> spoke in a soft voice.

"Mmm, I think so too."

The final objective of being a Sennenshi. In the process of teaming up with someone to

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complete the mission, he had gradually caught sight of it as he inched slowly towards his objective.

"Alright, I'll have to work hard tomorrow as well. But first, I'll have to meet up with Leon and the girls."

That will be his first task.

..... Wait for me, Ymy. I'll definitely return in triumph.

Intermission: Tranquility of the heart

The time flows by slowly and silently.

As she immersed herself in what felt like time that had been diluted and extended indefinitely, Ymy stared at the ceiling of her own room blankly.

"..... There's only one explanation for that."

"It's the same with how Sheltis was repelled by the doors of the Grand Holy Hall. Ymy, you are in possession of the strongest shinryoku out of the five Priestesses. The reason why you're the only person to repel Sheltis..... is because your shinryoku is too powerful."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> explained the reason for Elbert Resonance.

When an overly powerful mateki comes into contact with an equally powerful shinryoku, the laws of physics will be distorted, resulting in the release of electricity.

"....."

After being burnt by the flames of Elbert Resonance, her fingertips were now slightly whitish in color, and it felt painful when touched.

"Ymy, the waves of your shinryoku are large and beautiful."

"As a Priestess who maintains Hyouketsu Kyoukai, that should be something to be proud of."

She could still faintly remember those words of blessing from a senior Priestess, back on the day she had become a Priestess.

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The amplitude of the waves signifies the absolute strength of the shinryoku.

What irony.

The pristine and absolute qualities of a Priestess has now turned into the reason which denied her the rights to come into contact with the person whom she is closest to.

"..... Ymy, are you thinking of something?"

With both of her hands carrying a red tray, the black-haired girl in a woven vestment had quietly walked out from within the room.

"Have some tea..... here."

"Thank you, Syun-rei."

After accepting the cup of tea, Ymy gently cupped her hands around the sides of the cup.

"..... Ymy, you really wanted to go along with them, right?"

"Mmm..... However, after calming myself down and thinking about it, I realized I had actually arranged for my disciplines later."

Tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that.

A discipline that requires her to submerge into the waters of over ten meters deep that is filled with floating ice, by tying heavy objects onto her body - it's a discipline that pushes her mental state to its limits. There's also the other extreme, which requires her to pray in the burning hot sand until she is exhausted physically.

Since their days as apprentice-Priestesses, they have been undergoing such training that is akin to torture.

Those are disciplines to ensure that no matter what sort of mental conditions they are in - or in other words, even if they are to completely collapse psychologically - they will be able to continue the prayers for Hyouketsu Kyoukai. The discipline of <<Tranquil Heart>>.

She do know very well that those disciplines are essential for a Priestess. However, wouldn't it be

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great if there is someone by her side who can understand the pains that she is going through?

All she needs is someone to tell her "It's been hard on you" — and yet as a Priestess still without her Sennenshi, there is no one whom she can depend on psychologically.

"That can't be helped, I'm fine with the way things are for now."

".....?"

Syun-rei looked confused.

After showing a slight smile to Syun-rei, Ymy looked up at the ceiling of her room.

"Because, I am already very happy about the fact that he returned to the *Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>*."

Mateki and shinryoku that repel one another, and their fingertips that harm each other. Everything may seem unchanged, but there is a difference compared to two years ago - the young man has returned to the *Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>*.

Even if it is unacceptable to the ways of the world—

Even if we cannot touch each other's hands, we can still convey our feelings via words.

"I know Sheltis is trying his best to become a regular guard. Therefore, what I can do now is properly fulfill my role as a Priestess. It'll be okay for me to leave the issue about the mateki within him for later."

As a Priestess, she will be on the highest floor of the tower, awaiting for the arrival of that young man.

It's a trust that transcends all words.

"..... Mmm."

Syun-rei smiled gently and carefully handed out the red tea tray.

"..... Want to have another cup?"

"Ah, yes please. Can you add a little bit of sugar in it?"

"..... No."

Chapter 4: Forbidden Crystal

{1}

The rays were shining through the gaps of the dense forestry. The moisture released by the trees turned into mist, and lingered around the gradually brightening sea of trees.

"Mmm— the forest during the night time has some mysterious aura about it, but the forest in the morning is pretty awesome too. The smell of the trees are much heavier."

"Eyri-nee, I saw a butterfly that was this big!"

The girl in overalls took a refreshing deep breath as she stretched her arms out wide. The black-haired little girl by her side was jumping around with a smile on her face.

"You two, don't get too far away."

Leon quickened his pace as well, so as not to lose sight of the two who may disappear from their wandering at any moment.

..... They're really energetic.

They had fooled around the whole time last night, so he had no idea where their energy came from.

"Ah, I can see the aircraft!"

Eyriey pointed to the silver object which they could see amid the trees.

"So we shall just wait here?"

"Yeah, I sent a mail to Sheltis' badge last night. Seems like we got here first."

After circling the aircraft once, there was still no sight of those two around.

"..... The damage to the aircraft is much lighter than what I had anticipated."

The silver aircraft was lying horizontally on the ground after it had knocked down a tree.

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Despite being attacked by the electric faeries, they could not see many noticeable traces of damage on the outside. The worst was just the scratches to the outer coat of paint when it crashed onto the ground.

"But of course. It crashed only because the currents to the engines were not stable."

"It'll crash just from that?"

"Machines are actually very sensitive. However, I'll have to check through it once. It may be able to move now after a night, and even if it can't, we can still release a distress signal."

With that, the girl squeezed into the aircraft excitedly.

..... So I'll be looking after the kid while I leave the aircraft in her care?

"Can Yuto go there? There's a big tree over there!"

As he looked downwards at the little girl who was tugging onto his trousers, Leon gave a sigh,

"I'll come along as well. Don't stray off too far from the aircraft though."

The current in the engines had been tuned back to normal, and its output had been restored back to eighty percent.

"So everything's fine. What a good girl."

As she caressed the dials on the cockpit, Eyriey tossed the green gloves in her hands at the windows. She was originally worried that there might be a short-circuit when she conducted the check on the engine, but it seemed like she had worried too much about it. In fact, she was surprised by how normal everything was.

"Eyriey."

She turned around. The silver-haired young man was standing there.

"Ah, good timing. It seems like the aircraft is operational."

"That's perfect..... We've encountered something over here too. Yuto's waiting outside. You come along too."

With that, Leon walked out of the cockpit.

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What's wrong?

Despite her being all confused about the situation, Eyriey still followed behind him.

"Ah, Eyri-nee! It's great! I've found something!"

"What's up, Yuto?"

After descending from the steps of the aircraft, Yuto and Leon both walked up to her.

"So, what's happening around here?"

"Just as you were checking the aircraft, I took a walk around to check up on our surroundings. Did you notice something strange about this primeval forest?"

"I don't really know how to answer that sudden question of yours, since I'm not too well versed about biology."

"Especially the trees in that area."

Leon pointed towards an area of the primeval forest where there was a group of large trees clustered together. There were over tens of them, and they were protruding out of the forest like a small hill.

They had lined up in a circle, as though they were shielding something.

"Oh?"

"That's right, that's the only place with a cluster of tall trees grouped together. I walked there to take a closer look, and..... I think it's better if you see it with your own eyes."

Leon turned around, with his coat swaying in the air.

"Ah, wait. We don't have to wait for Sheltis at the aircraft?"

"I've just contacted him. It seems like it will be a while before they reach here, so I asked them to head straight to that area to join in the search."

What exactly is that?

With a half curious and half confused mindset, Eyriey followed behind Leon and Yuto.

"Actually, the person who discovered that is Yuto."

The young man who was paving the road by prying open the branches suddenly stopped in his tracks.

..... This is?

"A research facility?"

It's a dark grayish rectangular building. There were no decorations nor windows on the walls, just green moss all over it. It's as though the building had camouflaged itself into the surrounding forest.

"Strange? Wait, this is definitely a research facility. But if so, isn't it really strange for it not to be registered on the map released by the Government Sector?"

"That's the most suspicious thing about this place."

Leon stared at the building before him.

"A research facility built on a desolated island; a totally enclosed structure without any windows. The green moss on the walls acts as a camouflage beneath the leaves of the trees, thus totally hiding itself from aerial view..... Well then, what exactly is the Government Sector planning?"

Za — The silver-haired swordsman walked to the front of the building with firm steps.

"So there's no main door at its front huh? Whatever. Let's find a place where we can enter. I'll head right. Eyriey and Yuto, you two head left."

"Understood. We'll just have to circle it once, right? Let's go, Yuto."

With her back facing Leon, Eyriey began to head towards the left side of the building with Yuto.

"..... Then again, it's really surprising that you can find something like this, Yuto."

"Ehehe, I'm good?"

"Well, it's no wonder we never noticed it. There's no way we'd realize it unless we got closer to it."

Alright, where exactly is the door located?

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The two of them fixed their gaze on the walls as they walked on. However, they found nothing that looked remotely like an entrance despite them scanning through the walls of the building. The deep-gray paints on the building had already faded slightly due to the constant weathering..... from that alone, one can deduce that the building is not something that was built in recent years.

As they turned the first corner, they encountered the second wall.

It's almost the same as the first slab of wall that they saw - there are no windows nor decorations on it. The most they could see aside from the moss were the vines scaling the walls.

"Well— we can't get in at all. I wonder if Leon found anything over there."

Suddenly, she realized that her surroundings were deadly quiet.

..... Yuto?

The black-haired little girl was standing motionlessly at the first corner - it was as if she had stopped blinking and moving as well.

Those amber-colored eyes of hers were giving off a glow, as though she had detected something.

"Yu—"

Just as Eyriey was about to shout.

"So it's here?"

Perhaps it was due to the wind, but Eyriey could barely pick up the soft words that came out of the little girl's mouth. In the next moment, Yuto's left hand shimmered, similar to a gush of hot air—

Guooooooooooooooooooooo!

There was a rumbling sound akin to that of a wild beast. The originally seamless walls suddenly sank inwards. *Kan* - an entrance about the width of an adult appeared before them after the walls had totally sunk inside.

A secret passageway?

"Eyri-nee, here, here! This is great!"

"Eh? Ah.....hhhh, mmm."

Eyriey finally regained her senses when she heard Yuto calling her with her childish voice.....
Could that sound have been an illusion of hers?

"This is really impressive! Isn't this a secret passageway? How did you find it?"

"Mmm..... let's see?"

Yuto pushed her finger against her lips.

"Yuto doesn't know either! It just seemed like this wall was really clean."

"Ah, I get it. There's no moss over here."

Different from the other walls that they saw, since this wall had moving mechanisms, it would be hard for the moss to grow on it. Yuto probably saw it by chance, and never really thought that deep into it.

"So what do you guys got? Found anything?"

The silver-haired young man walked towards them from a corner far away.

"Ah, good news! Yuto found a secret passageway!"

"Oh? You've done quite a great deal, considering that you discovered the research facility as well."

"Ehehe—"

The little girl closed her eyes in happiness as Leon patted her head.

"I've found an ordinary door over the other side. It's locked, but I don't really need much effort to destroy that sort of simple padlock..... So where should we enter?"

Eyriey pointed towards the dark passageway without hesitation.

"Of course the place that was hidden."

"My thoughts exactly."

Leon crossed his arms and nodded.

"I'll lead the way. You two must really be on your guard this time around."

"A research facility hidden amid the primeval forest huh – they've used some creative methods to conceal the building too. Leon and the girls are really something."

"..... Darn, I thought we could head back immediately. Seems like things are not as simple as I first thought."

Sheltis gave a slight wry smile as he looked at the dark gray building.

It's about two stories high, judging from its height. Since there were no windows to be seen, nor were there any seams, there may be more floors within than anticipated.

"How are things over there?"

He made a cross with his arms in reply to Monica's question, who was standing a considerable distance in front of him.

"Absolutely nothing. I've checked the surroundings thoroughly, but there's only a single place that seems suspicious."

There was a brand new copper-colored padlock on the door. The metal door was full of red rust, and yet the padlock looked as good as new - perfect proof that there's someone who's been using the door recently.

"I've found a secret passageway here..... though someone probably discovered it already. All I saw was an entrance."

"That should be Leon. He just sent me a message saying that he'd explore the place first, and asked us to help out when we arrived."

"So, what should we do? Do we chase them via that passageway?"

"No."

He pointed to the door that opens from the middle, and grabbed onto the metal padlock.

"We'll go this way."

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"I was thinking the same too."

Monica swung the *crossed rods* <Rosario> in her right hand. There was a hint of a smile in her sharp eyes.

The door was destroyed with a dull sound.

"Right, let's go."

— The reason the Queen sent a Sennenshi to this island.

— If the reason is because of this research facility here.....

"Monica, I don't think I need to remind you, but please stay on your guard."

Gripping onto the two handlebars, Sheltis pushed opened the door of the research facility.

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A dim, narrow passageway.

Each step they took brought up a cloud of dust into the turbid air.

"I've already prepared myself psychologically for this, but I still never expect this research facility to be that ghastly."

Monica cringed her face slightly as she touched the walls that had a poor finishing on their surface.

"It's dark and cramped, and there's a musty smell too..... I really don't feel like staying around here."

"I feel the same too. Even if we're here to find something, I hope we can get things over and done with quickly, and leave this place."

As they stood before a door at the ends of the passageway, Sheltis shot a glance at Monica.

— I'm gonna open it.

After receiving a nod of approval from her, he increased the strength exerted from his arms. Unexpectedly, the door opened up really easily.

Before them was a huge dark space. It felt like the place was rather spacious, but since there was no lighting inside, they could not grasp the full interiors of the room.

"What to do? Iris, why don't you release some light like a machine? Just release light at about thirty times brighter compared to normal, and we should be able to see the interiors of the room clearly."

"I can if you want me to. However, due to the overload, I'll become hotter than a heated frying pan."

"..... Let's just look for a switch to the lights."

"Found it."

Monica's voice came from far away.

A *kacha* sound rang, and the room was flooded with a blinding flash of light for a brief moment.

"..... A library?"

Sheltis murmured as he took a look at the room under the shine of the lights.

It's a huge space that extended inwards for over ten meters long, and the sides of the walls were filled with giant bookshelves lined up together. Each of them was approximately three meters high, and it was designed such that the top shelves can only be reached via ladders.

There were four round desks in the middle of the room, and each desk had three chairs assigned to it. There were stand-alone computers and screens placed on the desk.

"Illustrations of plants, distribution of the vegetation, makeups of the soil, the climate of the

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floating island..... They are probably things left by the explorers of this island. Each and every report is rather detailed."

Monica tapped on the keyboards of the computers at a rapid speed. The details shown on the screens before them were undoubtedly information left by the researchers.

"The books on the shelves consists of similar information as well."

"..... Which means, this is just an ordinary research facility?"

Sheltis randomly picked out some encyclopedias from the shelves, and browsed through it roughly. However, they were typical encyclopedias. There's not a single problem about the publishers and the date of release as well.

"They may be just a facade. Want to check through each and every terminal and book?"

"Hmm— we should leave these things to units that are in charge of carrying those tasks. It's not like we are familiar with these things anyway."

In the investigation of the *Floating Archipelagos* <*Lagoon*>, the guards only plays the role of a scout, to ensure that there are no harmful beasts and insects, or that there will be no danger of the ground collapsing and such. Special expertise teams will only investigate about the topology of the islands much later.

"So are we meeting up with Captain Leon?"

"I guess, though I wonder if they are—"

Just then.

There was a sudden violent rumble beneath his feet.

Let's turn back time to an hour before that.

"..... Right, what shall we do now?"

Leon stopped in his tracks when he saw the strange sight before him.

After going through the passageway that an adult could barely squeeze through, they came to a mechanical room at the end of it.

At their feet were red and blue wires of various width crisscrossing together messily like a spiderweb. There were plenty of pipes hanging from the walls and ceilings, and their ears were filled with the sounds of gases flowing through the pipes.

There were computers of various sizes in front of them. They seemed to be connected to the grounds, and all that could be seen were tiny indicators giving off a weird neon glow.

"..... Oh—"

Eyriey was walking around the room, but she suddenly stopped in her tracks. The place she was looking at was the measurement instruments located at the innermost areas of the room.

"Is this place the control room of the building?"

"Twenty points. Full mark's hundred, by the way."

The young girl replied without even turning her head back.

"About twenty percent of the machines in this room is related to the power source and etc. That's quite easy to see, but I am not quite sure about the remaining eighty percent. I think there should be a control terminal somewhere else in another room. If there is none, then I really do not have any idea what they are."

"If so, that means you don't understand the use of these computers here?"

Perhaps she had already expected that Leon would ask her that - Eyriey flashed an profound smile of bitterness, and scratched her head.

"..... Urm— the best I can do is to guess. Can I?"

"Ahh."

"Then here I go. This is probably a 'Control Device'."

After hearing her voice reverberating in the room, the young girl continued,

"The huge computer is online and operational even though there's not a single person in the facility. From that, it should be because these machines are used to maintain something."

— She sounded pretty sure even though she said she was guessing.

The young girl was probably pretty certain about her conjecture. And Leon was quite confident about that speculation as well.

"..... So what is it controlling?"

"I have no clue. However, it should be located somewhere in this facility. I originally thought this passageway will lead us to somewhere, but it seems like we've hit a dead-end. If so, there may be other secret passages or hidden rooms....."

After scanning her surroundings once, Eyriey's sight rested on a certain area in the room.

"Can I operate this for a while?"

It was a stand-alone terminal located in the middle of the room.

All that was displayed on the screen was a blank white background.

"That's....."

Anyone who stepped into the room would probably see that terminal first. However, as that terminal was way too eye-catching, Leon did not dare to touch it casually.

It might be a trap.

Even if it is not, something bad may happen should there be any error occurring when they were working on it. In the worst situation, it may be installed with a program that will trigger

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off the self-destruction device that will blow up the whole facility.

"Sorry, as for that terminal....."

"Ah, sorry. I've already touched it."

"Oi!?"

"Ahaha! It's because you were to slow with your reply."

Eyriey flashed a mischievous smile as she tapped onto the keyboard of the terminal at great speeds.

"Moreover, this terminal is probably not a trap."

"Why so?"

"The possibility of an outsider arriving here is already very slim. This is an unregistered floating island, and we were forced to land on here without the prior approval of the Government Sector. We first found the research facility hidden in the depths of the primeval forest by chance, then we happen to find the secret passage as well before we are able to reach here. Do you really think there is a need for them to set up any further precautionary measures?"

In contrast to her lighthearted tone, Eyriey's reasoning was highly logical.

..... And it probably is just as she had said.

It's the same for Leon. If not for the orders of the Queen, he would never have came to this island by himself. There's no possibility of him exploring the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> by his own accord if he has not received any mission in regards to it.

"And there's another reason as well. It seems really easy to operate this terminal. If it is a trap, then shouldn't it be much more complicated?"

Eyriey's fingers were dancing furiously on the keyboard as if she was playing a piano. The blazing rhythm had even produced a sense of beauty from it. The girl suddenly raised her

fingertips up elegantly, and then—

"Right, let's see what we've got here."



At the instant she keyed in the final button.

Came the sound of a certain giant object moving.

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"Something really interesting has appeared."

The *crystal machine* <Iris> broke the silence by saying that casually.

"That's quite sudden..... We did nothing here, so perhaps Captain Leon and the girls did something on their side. Or it may be someone luring us to a trap. What should we do, Sheltis?"

Monica stood at the side with the *crossed rods* <Rosario> in her hands.

That line of hers showed the tense atmosphere in which both of them were in. She stared straight at the target beneath her, without blinking her eyes.

A flight of stairs that went downwards.

The floor shifted along with the rumbling which they felt earlier, and the entrance to what seemed to be a basement was revealed.

The stairs were shrouded in darkness, and they could not see the ends of the path no matter how hard they looked.

"If that is the destination of our trip here, then I think it will be better for us to head down by ourselves first."

Shelits said that to Monica as he fixed his gaze on the stairs.

"We are not waiting for the instructions of Captain Leon?"

"Eyriey and Yuto are still with Leon. If we are to ask him to meet up with us before heading off, then the girls will have to follow along as well. Eyriey's not a guard, while Yuto's still young, so I absolutely cannot allow them to face any sort of danger."

"Smart choice. It is much easier for a pair to act should the two of you encounter anything. We shall be the scouts."

Mmm— Just as he was nodding his head in agreement with the suggestion of the *crystal machine*

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<Iris>.

He noticed that Monica, who was beside him, was strangely quiet.

"....."

The young girl was gripping onto the pair of *crossed rods* <Rosario> in her hands, but her face was pale white.

"Monica?"

"..... Ah..... Ahhhh."

She suddenly widened her eyes.

"You alright? Your expression was really frightening."

"..... I'm fine. I just feel slightly dizzy."

With that, she took a step forward.

"Alright, since it's already decided, then let's head off quickly."

"—Mmm."

Monica slowly walked down the stairs that led to the basement, as the sound of her shoes rang. Sheltis followed in her steps quickly after taking a look at her back.

Ka..... ka.....

The dreary footsteps of the two people reverberated along the passageway as they walked down the stairs, which had a visibility of barely two meters ahead. After confirming the situation they were in via the echos, he gripped onto the *crystal machine* <Iris> that was hanging before his chest.

"Iris, this flight of stairs is quite shoddily built."

"I am thinking about the same thing as well."

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The *crystal machine* <Iris> replied him quicker than he had expected.

"The materials which the stairs were made of is obviously different to those used on the floors and walls above. The floor was made out of strengthened metal alloy, but this place is constructed using cheap alloys. That's the reason for the echoes of your footsteps."

"..... Meaning?"

Monica, who was walking in front of him, turned her head around and asked.

"It's highly possible for this flight of stairs to be constructed much later. If so, the possibility of the flight of stairs being a trap will be greatly reduced."

It's the same with how fake drawings will always be more "real" than the originals. Since the point of faking is 'to be more real than the originals', there is probably no one who will design a trap that looked like an obvious shoddy work.

"This means we're heading in the right direction?"

"Yes. The possibility is quite high."

He gently gripped onto the hilts of his dual swords. He could not construct the blades due to the narrow flight of stairs. As such, the *crystal machine* <Iris> was on standby mode, ready to construct the blades at the voice of his command.

Ka— —

Their line of vision suddenly broadened when they walked past the final step.

..... This place is?

It was a huge room which was as spacious as the floor above them.

The only difference was that instead of shelves of books, the room was filled up with large black computers instead.

The wires beneath their feet were crisscrossing with each other messily, while huge pipes were

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hanging from the ceilings above. The thing that was lighting up everything which they were seeing were eerie red-colored light cast down from the ceiling.

It was a peculiar sight. However, the strangest thing was the object located in the middle of the place.

It was an extremely large screen that extended all the way from the floor to the ceiling.

"..... What's displayed on it?"

Monica raised her guard and took a step closer.

Zi..... Zi!!!!!!..... Zi!!!!!!.....!

A black and white screen filled with static. Not only they were forced to decipher the image with only the monochrome colors, but the resolution of the screen was pretty low as well.

"Is it broken?"

She knitted her brows.

..... No, that's not it.

The screen is not broken. What it is displaying, is the thing that is located in the middle—

..... A girl?

"Sheltis, what's wrong?"

"Somehow, it feels like..... there's a girl in the middle of the screen."

He could indeed see what seems to be a silhouette of a girl, in the center of all the static.

And then there's the transparent shadows that were encasing the girl — they could be either ice or crystals. The girl was sealed within layers of hard, transparent crystals. That's what Sheltis felt the screen was showing him.

"I am really sorry, but I can't affirm what you had said. What about Monica?"

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"I can't make out that either. Perhaps it's just your illusion due to all the static on the screen."

An illusion due to the distortion of the static. Indeed, he could not deny the possibility of that happening. Putting Monica aside, he was fully certain of the *crystal machine* <Iris>'s image processing capabilities.

..... So I am the one seeing things?

He rubbed his eyes, and looked at the center of the screen once more.



His eyes came into direct contact with the eyes of the girl's in the screen.

..... Shel..... tis.

..... Are you the person..... who is looking at me?

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..... Looking at the frozen dream of the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> Looking at the Forbidden Crystal.....

At that instant, a scene suddenly flashed past his mind.

A world filled with black waters.

A young man with tea-red colored hair was slowly sinking down with his eyes closed.

Deeper and deeper.

He was sinking downwards in a world filled with darkness, a world that was incredibly quiet and slow.

The deep purple lights encased his body, as though they were blessing him—

..... Sheltis.....

..... At the Floating Continent where everything is still in their dreams, at the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> where all time are frozen.....

..... You..... and your mateki..... awakens.....

"Sheltis!"

"Oi, Shel-Sheltis!"

"!"

Sheltis finally returned back to his senses when Monica shook his shoulders.

"What has happened to you?"

"Ah, no....."

Just then, the young girl in the screen turned her head to look towards his direction..... no, she was looking at him.

A screen appeared before his eyes the moment they exchanged gazes with each other.

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Is that..... me? Could it be back when I fell into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>—

"Sheltis, are you alright?"

"..... Mmm. Monica and Iris, please take another careful look at the center of the screen. I am certain there's a girl there."

—Kra—

There was the sound of something cracking, as if it was laughing at what he had just said.

They originally thought it came from the screen, but the screen was still filled with the monochrome image and the static.

It's not the screen. What's that then?

"Behind it?"

Monica walked around the screen that was almost blocking the whole room, and made her way to its back. Just as her body was about to disappear behind the back of the screen, Sheltis hastily reminded her,

"Monica, be careful."

"I know. I am just curious about what is behind—"

Monica's voice was suddenly cut off at an extremely unnatural moment.

"....."

"Monica?"

"..... Ahh.....!"

A hoarse shout that sounded neither like a shriek nor her weeping.

"Monica, what's wrong?"

He squeezed past the space beneath the screen, and got next to her side.

There.

"This is—"

Even the *crystal machine* <Iris> was at a loss of words as well.

What appeared before them was a giant column of water tank.

The water tank was filled with a blue liquid and countless tiny air bubbles. That's all.

However, the *crystal machine* <Iris> could not say a single word. Monica was staring at the water tank as she bit hard on her lips.

As for Sheltis—

"....."

He quietly gripped tight on the hilts of his dual swords after seeing the object that was in the water tank.

It was a Yuugenshu that was being "incubated" in a huge water tank.

{3}

"Warning."

"Abnormalities detected to the hypnosis wavelength of
Experimental Body #2, code-named 'Slumbering Child'."

An automated voice suddenly rang from the ceilings. At the same time, the warning red lights began to flash throughout the floor.

"Eyri-nee, I'm scared....."

"W-What's with this alarm! Did I press something wrong at the terminal just now?"

Yuto pressed herself against Eyriey, who hugged her tightly in return.

"No."

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Leon shook his head to disagree, as he looked at the floor being dyed red by the crimson lights.

Just like what she had said earlier, the possibility of a trap set on the terminal is very low. If so, then there must be another reason for the alarm to went off.

— Experimental Body #2.

There was a strange term mentioned in the automated warning. They did not find anything that looked like it in the floor where they were on. If so, the only possibility was that Eyriey had triggered a path at the other stories after she had operated the terminal.

"Eyriey, take Yuto and run back to the aircraft right now! I'll go and meet up with Sheltis and Monica. Seems like the place where they are at is the real crux to the matter."

"Yeah, I think so too. In any case, let's get moving, Yuto!"

Eyriey planned to make a dash for it after she grabbed onto Yuto's hand. Just then—

Along with the tremors of the ground as well as a strange metallic sound, the innermost wall of the building collapsed.

"Warning."

"It is confirmed that the hypnosis for 'Slumbering Child' has failed. It is speculated that there is an infiltration of a malicious third party, which in turn awakened it."

"To prevent the second wave of damage, begin the automatic destruction of 'Slumbering Child' as well as the malicious third party."

Zu..... Zuzuuu.....

The floor was rumbling.

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A shiny black gigantic object was slowly approaching them from within the dark floors.

"Combat robot?"

Eyriey could immediately recognize what it was from a brief look at it.

A thick armor which gave off a dull metallic shine. Its both arms were equipped with shiny black heavy weapons, and it was carrying armored-vehicle-class shells on its back. That's not all. There were bluish-white patterns all over its body. The straight-lined patterns were flashing repeatedly, and the glow had covered the whole body of the combat robot.

"Heavy-armed combat robot, with the marks of shinryoku engraved on it..... To think they have actually shipped this thing specially onto this island."

The robot inched closer to them with loud steps.

"....."

Faced with such an overwhelming presence, Leon silently swung the hilt of his great sword.

"W-What are you doing? Shouldn't you be running away in a situation like this?"

"The so called malicious third party is probably referring to Sheltis and Monica. Something may have happened there, so I have to destroy this fella."

"No, that's not what I mean—"

"It's fine,"

After saying that, Leon began to dash towards the combat robot.

"In any case, if you do not wish to be hit by the stray shells of the heavy weapons system, then hide yourself at the corner of the room right now."

—Piki..... ki..... ki.....—

Cracks began appearing on the reinforced glass of the water tank. The blue fluid flowed all over the ground.

Each time the beast which was shrouded with the dark purple mist pulsates, the cracks on the water tank would widen.

"How can this be..... who will actually do such a thing like..... breeding a Yuugenshu?"

"We'll investigate on that later. The important thing is to deal with this thing here and ensure we come out alive."

Sheltis walked to the front of Monica, and stared at the enemy before them.

..... The Yuugenshu has responded to our infiltration?

His hunch told him that he was not too far off from the truth. The Queen's order was not really targeted at the facility itself. Rather, the real target were probably the image in the giant screen, as well as the bred Yuugenshu.

That's right. There was not just a single objective behind their mission. Taking that into consideration, one can then understand the reason for the lack of focus behind the Queen's order.

"Iris."

"Begin the construction of the anti-Yuugenshu blades. Fixing a silver monad as the core, and encasing its surrounding with a layer of azure crystals of Hyouketsu Kyoukai. Limit to destruction is set to be at sevenfold."

A thin silver line extended outwards from the blade-less hilts. The brilliant azure crystals began to encase it, and they gradually formed the blades.

The glass of the water tank had shattered.

Slosh..... With its body covered with fluids, the four limbs of the Yuugenshu came into

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contact with the floor.

A wild beast shrouded with an eerie mist all over its body, sending chills down the spines of whoever that sees it. Amid the dark purple mist, was a pair of red eyes filled with animosity, and looking towards their direction.

"..... So we've no choice but to strike?"

"Seems like it— here it comes!"

The howl of the beast.

What followed next was the shocking 'transformation' that came immediately after.

Final Chapter: Let everything resemble that day, I pray that it would become like that —youngsters—

{0}

..... I, Monica Esperanto, entered the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> at the age of seven.

I was one of the contenders to be a Priestess that protects the world — an apprentice-Priestess.

Just like the rest of the apprentices, I was really happy when I was chosen to be an apprentice-Priestess. I thought I could finally contribute something. Though it may be a little too exaggerated for me to be saying that..... but one day, I may really become an essential person on this floating continent.

However, most of the apprentice-Priestesses who entered the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> with that dream in mind had left the place willingly within a year.

Training that was akin to torture, mixed together with our tears and blood.

Glamorous and mysterious. Many apprentice-Priestesses were hit hard by reality, which was way different from the image of the Priestesses they had in their minds.

— As for me, I ended up failing horribly on the final test.

For someone who could not become a Priestess, how should I go about with my life next?

The people close to me recommended that I take up roles to develop the other apprentice-Priestesses. However, I hoped to be just like that dual-sword wielding young man - since I couldn't become a Priestess, I might as well walk on the path to protect them.

A cadet guard since the age of fifteen.

However, I'd be hit with constant failure..... for the next three years. Things like a mock team battle, or even when I was carrying out the actual missions - my body would not move due to nervousness whenever I was at critical juncture.

That was a psychological scar in me.

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Because, I would always recall the final test of a Priestess — the scene in which I failed.

The eight years as an apprentice-Priestess; the eight years that I went through, supported by my tears and my pain - everything disappeared in an instant. I couldn't move whenever I thought of that.

An utterly useless cadet guard. Since I was labelled like that, over time, there were no longer any squads that were willing to welcome my participation.

For about a year after that, I was always alone—

"H-Hey! Are you alone right now? Have you teamed up with anyone else?"

Because of that, I was really happy when there was someone who invited me to participate in the mock team battle.

That was the very first time that I was victorious in a team training exercise. Since that day, it was like everything changed. With those thoughts in mind, I participated in this mission.

The enigmatic *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>; the mysterious research facility; the bred Yuugenshu.

However, the enemy is just a small-sized Yuugenshu.

Even though the danger still exists, I am still able to fight against it with the arts of shinryoku that I had learned before. As a part of the team, I am able to contribute as well.

..... That's what I have always thought.

..... However.

{1}

"..... What's going on..... This monster....."

Due to the shock from the scene before her, Monica was murmuring in a daze.

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Gya..... Chiii.....!

The density of the mist surrounding the Yuugenshu had increased explosively all of a sudden.

The body of mist was expanding. One could see changes to the legs of the looming Yuugenshu amid the mist. There were originally thick shells on its legs, but the top layer of the shell was blasted apart, and the leg slowly became thicker.

The legs had already exceeded four to five meters in length, even though it was just barely one meter high at the start. Its diameter used to be as thick as that of a human wrist, but now it had grown to exceed the width of her own body. Not just that, it was tightly encased with a layer of newly grown shell.

— Battle mode? No, that's wrong. Could it be that it has grown that much within this short period of time?

Zu..... Zuzuu.....

The ceiling, which was reinforced by metal, was beginning to melt after coming into contact with the mist of the Yuugenshu.

It was originally just the size of a human child, but now it had grown into a giant Yuugenshu that reached the top end of the floor.

Pra— even the screen before it was crushed and shattered by the Yuugenshu.

The body expanded horizontally like a crab. The whole body was covered with a layer of spotted shell. Six legs that were as sharp as spears extended out from that body. It was over five meters in height, and one would have to lift their head up high to be able to see the whole Yuugenshu.

"..... This is?"

She said those words unknowingly through her lips.

That had way exceeded the definition of growth.

— A mutation?

That was way different from any of the living organisms that were on the floating continent. More importantly, even though she had encountered Yuugenshu during her stint as an apprentice-Priestess, she had never seen variants that had gone through such strange changes.

How should she fight against an unknown opponent?

"Monica, evade!"

"Eh?"

Everything was already too late when she came to her senses.

The Yuugenshu had already approached her silently, and it had swung its leg, which was as thick as a log. When she lifted her head to see what was above her, the sharp spear-like leg was already crashing down on her swiftly—

It was too late for her to escape.

Upon understanding that fact, the world around her slowed down, just like a tiny frame in the movies. She could feel the time around her flowing slowly, as though there was some sort of slow-motion effect going on.

..... The moment just before death.

Everything, including herself as well as the movements of the Yuugenshu, were in the world of slow motion. Even so, nothing has changed. The leg of the Yuugenshu was still cleaving down towards her like a giant axe.

Don—

Eh?

Someone knocked into her from her sides, and pushed her body out of the attack of the Yuugenshu.

..... I'm saved?

Just as that thought came to her mind, Monica was immediately overwhelmed by a sense of regret, that almost made her cry.

The Yuugenshu delivered the wicked blow.

And what happened before her was—

The young man, who protected her by crashing into her, was struck hard behind his head. He was blown away by the attack.

"..... Sh..... el....."

Blood spewed out from behind his head like a blooming flower. His whole body slammed into the wall close to the edges of the room. He remained motionless after that.

With that, the time of the world resumed its normal flow.

"Shel..... tis..... Oi! Shel—"

No response.

The young man collapsed onto the floor in a pool of crimson red blood.

That one thing signified everything.

"..... Ah....."

..... H-Hey, don't make jokes..... like that.....

..... You'll definitely stand up immediately, right? You're..... just pretending.....

.....

..... How.....

Someone, anyone, tell me this is not real.

The young man remained motionless.

"_____!"

The shriek of the young girl sounded far from that of a human cry - it was a tone of absolute sadness. Even though she was shouting his name, that was not what came out of her mouth. Despite her wanting to run up towards him, her legs remained immobile.

For the first time ever, Monica understood what a shriek was.

Though she had teared or sobbed during her training as an apprentice-Priestess, she had never cried that hard before.

As such, it was the first time that she was experiencing everything. Including the bloodcurdling scream from her throat, as well as the despair that exceeded her anger which she felt due to her own foolishness.

"Sheltis..... Sheltis!"

Despite her repeatedly squeezing that name out of her mouth, all that succeeded in doing was creating echoes in the floor in which they were in.

The young man was lying motionlessly on the blood-stained floor.

"I've said it ever since the beginning. Regardless of being a guard or a Priestess, I'm just a failure."

"Ever since failing the final test to become a Priestess, my body will become stiff and immobile whenever I face something important."

..... It was indeed like what I had said.

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..... Regardless of where I go to, the scar that I got back then will haunt me for life.

"I think it's probably because of this scar within me that hasn't been totally healed yet."

Klang

The *crossed rods* <Rosario> fell off from her hands, which had already lost their strength.

"..... Everything is my fault."

Monica no longer had the will to pick them back up. She knelt down on the floor.

..... If I wasn't around, then Sheltis wouldn't have collapsed from protecting me.

..... If I wasn't around..... If I wasn't on this team.....

The Priestesses that she used to look up to.

She hoped she could become the essential someone in everyone's eyes - someone who protects the floating continent. Therefore, she held back her tears and managed to hold on till the final test, despite her knowing very well that the absolute strength of her shinryoku was lacking.

The guard whom she used to look up to.

Even though she could not become a Priestess, she still hoped she could contribute by protecting the Priestesses.

Therefore, even though there was no squad that was willing to accept her, she still practiced her *crossed rods* <Rosario> by herself everyday, just like the dual-sword wielding young man she saw on that day.

However, the results still ended up as a failure.

Till the very end, she is a useless failure who could not become a Priestess nor a guard.....

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That was something that had been decided by the wounded world that she was in since the very beginning.

"....."

The Yuugenshu raised its sharp leg yet again.

— Her body could not move.

It wasn't due to the usual nervousness, but rather, her mind was occupied by the events of her teenage years - there was no room left for her to be concerned about her own safety.

Above her head was the incoming merciless strike, along with a swift gush of air.

She subconsciously closed her eyes upon seeing the giant leg that was about to hit her from above—

.....

..... Huh?

The incoming blow, the pain that should follow, as well as the death which should dawn onto her - all of it never came.

..... Why?

She timidly opened her eyes.

The young girl could not believe what she was seeing.

The originally collapsed young man had used his dual swords to block the attack from the leg of the Yuugenshu.

"..... Sh....."

"You're giving up just like that? That's not like you at all."

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She finally realized what she was witnessing was real, upon hearing his voice with her own ears.

—Kin!

The twin swords severed one of the legs.

"———— Grr!"

Contrary to its huge body, the movements of the Yuugenshu were extremely agile, and it leaped a considerable distance back in a single jump. On the other hand, the young man did something that was even more inconceivable.

After locking onto the retreating Yuugenshu, he dashed forward in full speed.

Plop

A trail of blood traced the path of the young man. Each time he took a step forward, the motion of his body would cause blood to flow out from the wound behind his head.

"..... Wha.....!"

Monica looked at the scene in a daze.

That's just too reckless. He should not be moving about after suffering such an injury. Ignoring whether his body can hold on despite the blood loss, what about his consciousness? Can he really maintain a clear state of mind? Shouldn't his vision be blurry?

As he ran, the young man suddenly fell onto the ground, despite there being no obstacles around him.

— She was indeed right. There was no way he could move around freely after sustaining such a serious injury on his head.

"Stop, Sheltis! If you continue on like this—"

He may still be able to move for now, but if he continues to force himself, he may really cause

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damage to his brain..... no, he may actually endanger his life.

However, the young man did not stop moving.

He twisted his body to avoid the two legs that struck from his left and his right, and took the opportunity to chop one of them off cleanly. Using the wall to his left, he jumped up onto the ceiling and ran crazily to reach the back of the Yuugenshu in an instant.

But then, the young man knelt down to take a rest yet again.

Just as his shoulders were heaving up and down because of his breathing he lowered his head, at that moment the Yuugenshu attacked by swiping one of its legs horizontally towards him.

"Sheltis!"

He flew into the sky, just like a leaf that was fluttering in the air.

And similar to what happened before, he was slammed against the wall and then fell onto the ground—

But he did not collapse.

Sheltis used his dual swords to support his body and stabilize his steps.

He did not collapse. He will never collapse.

..... Why?

..... Why can he still stand?

..... And he has suffered such serious injuries because of me, so why—

"It's not your fault."

With his head still hanging low, he suddenly mumbled that out with a hoarse voice.

"..... Eh?"

"It's natural for me to protect Monica..... Because, we are teammates."

"B-But—"

"Monica, didn't you say that there was a guard that you admired? You said you wished you could become just like him - that young man who fell into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden>."

"W-Why are you mentioning that all of the sudden....."

"If that young man was still alive, he definitely wouldn't bow down to an opponent like this. Aren't I right!?"

— Just then.

A certain sound seemed to have rang from deep within my heart.

"T-That's because..... he..... was different from me. He—"

"There's nothing different!"

Just as I was about to explain, I was interrupted by the yell of the young man.

"Haven't you always hoped to become someone who can protect the floating continent! Even though you did not manage to become a Priestess, that conviction has allowed you to continue working hard to get to where you are today, right? You are always practicing later into the night than anyone else, isn't that so!?"

I could not speak.

It was as though he had seen through everything..... No, he did understand. Including my feelings, as well as the screams in my heart which I could not hide very well.

"You have always hoped that someday, you could be just like what that young man was, right? Get on your feet! This is the best chance for you to do so right now— so Monica, pick up your *crossed rods* <Rosario>!"

The dual-sword wielding young man whom she admired.

As well as the young man who was still fighting against the Yuugenshu, despite the multiple injuries on his body.

She did not know the reason why she did.

But Monica—

Had already overlapped the young man before her together with the 'young man of those days'.

— If so..... that should be enough.

Sheltis heaved a large breath of air as he wiped away the blood from his eyes.

"You are as reckless as ever."

"Totally not. It's because we are teammates from the same squad."

The attitude that all guards should have.

Three years ago, because he had an overly powerful teammate by his side in the form of Leon, he had never realized that not everyone possesses the physical and mental fortitude that he has. It's the same with the puppeteer and the dual gunner that he had fought together with Monica. In reality, everyone will have a weakness or two, that they will have to make up for.

— That was something that the him of three years ago did not notice.

"If I was a Priestess, I definitely wouldn't choose someone who only wants to protect the Priestess as a Sennenshi."

The him of three years ago did not understand what being a Sennenshi was all about as well.

The feelings which the Priestesses have in them, due to the tough disciplines that they must

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endure each and every day.

What sort of things the Priestesses are seeking from their Sennenshi.

The one who told him all those things was Monica who was in the same team as him. Therefore, he would not allow himself to fall.

Not as the young man whom she admired, but as her teammate.

"Can you still hold on?"

He ignored the question of the *crystal machine* <Iris>.

"Monica!"

Enduring the overwhelming dizziness and headache, Sheltis called out to the girl hoarsely.

"Let's work together. I'll be in charge of attracting the attention of the enemy. I'll leave the rest to you, just like what we did last time."

"..... Sheltis."

"Don't worry. You've always been practicing, no?"

He smiled and flashed a wink — Sheltis then made a dash for it.

Due to his dizziness, it felt like the floor was tilting. Not to mention, his sense of balance was totally disrupted. He had no idea if he was still running straight on the floor.

Even so, he could not stop.

The three legs were about to attack him from above, left and right. Sheltis depended on his blurred vision as well as his intuition to avoid the assaulting legs that were encased in a thick shell.

He skipped to the side to avoid the first strike which was going for his head. He then used the broad side of his blade to slam it against the incoming second strike that was approaching him,

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and used the recoil to keep his body afloat in the air. He landed on the leg of the enemy just like that, and swung the dual swords in his hands.

He sliced off the leg, along with the spotted shell as well as the mateki barrier which was protecting it.

— Half of it was done.

What's left are two right legs and a left one.

Just then, there was a sudden change in the atmosphere surrounding the Yuugenshu. It stopped moving its legs, one of which was lifted high into the air. The strange glows around its body burst outwards like millions of thin fibers.

The fibers entwined into threads, and the threads merged into lines. The lines combined together to form a giant glowing ring, big enough to occupy nearly half the area of the floor they were on.

A brief look at it would be enough for one to lose their vitality. However, the dark purple glow continued to intensify—

Oe/ Dia =U milve /x-recrey mihās I, xay xephnis xin sis.

<■ ■, ■ ■ ■, ■ ■ ■ ■, ... ■ ■ ■>

A strange tone reverberated throughout the floor.

Mateki. The source of power of all Yuugenshu; the cursed melody that erodes everything on the floating continent.

..... Zyuu..... zi.....

The brilliance engulfed everything, together with the young man. The grounds, walls and ceiling began to boil and evaporate.

The high-intensity beam swept through the whole floor, which easily melted the heat-resistant

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alloy. What was left was the Yuugenshu, which believed that it was assured of the victory. Amid the space that was filled with the white smoke of the smoldering metal—

A flash of two swords.

The twin swords of the young man had chopped off the leg of the Yuugenshu.

"—— Grr!"

For the first time ever, the Yuugenshu was unsure of what was going on.

That was the power which Sheltis had acquired after he was infected by the mateki of the *Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>*. In return for paying the price of losing the shinryoku of a human, he utilized his own mateki to render the mateki and the barriers of the Yuugenshu useless.

..... Right, that should be enough?

After understanding that its mateki was ineffective, the Yuugenshu aimed for the head of the young man, and swung its remaining two legs at it—

In the next instant, while remaining in the posture with its two legs raised in the air, the Yuugenshu stopped all of its movements.

Sia Sec elis arc..... Is io Miel

<I hope to dream once again, the dreams of that day.....>

The words of power flowed out of the young girl's lips, without a moment of hesitation or pause in between.

Zaaaa..... a sound similar to raindrops falling against leaves rang. The floor which was polluted by the mateki was gradually cleansed by the brilliantly shining white lights, which looked like fresh snow.

"*valen* = *C kis towle*

<— *Prayers, are just an illusion.*>

shel = *C eyen roo.*

<*The objects of desire, at a place out of reach.*>

Kyele = *C sion tis.*

<*Reality, exceeds all reasoning.*>

phia = *C delis elma.*

<*Thoughts, forgetting everything.*>

———— *ole* = *C kis eyen noe*

———— <*Dreams, hopefully resembling that day*>"



"..... You idiot."

She had activated the arts of the Priestesses using their language.

The praying arts that will bring the world blessings and miracles. Something which is not easily used by anyone. Something that can only be manipulated freely only after years of training in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

However, there's a girl here who has worked hard at the her training, harder than anyone else—

"You've said a bunch of stuff to me, and with that righteous tone too."

The line of sight of the Yuugenshu did not land on the ground or the walls, but at a place directly above it.

With a cluster of faintly glowing dots of white light, the girl leaped into the space close to the ceiling.

"Oh blessed metals..... the Third Stone..... Descend, the crystals of white silver!"

Pure white.

A color that is paler, more uncertain, and more easily stained than any other color out there.

But at the same time, it's a color that is unrivaled in terms of elegance and beauty.

..... That's right, I am not a Priestess.

..... However.

"Under the guidance of the advent..... the twenty-second power of the second process shall form the world."

The pale white particles of light shone around the whole body of the girl. The rays of light traveled through her arms, and blessed the *crossed rods* <Rosario> in her hand.

In that instant, the pale white light clustered themselves together, and began to crystallize.

The light of Shinryoku formed a brilliantly shining crystal at the tip of the rod, turning it into what seemed like a lance with a silver-white blade.

— As a guard, I hope to dedicate this power within me.

— And thus I swear.

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— From now on, I will be the same as him whom I admired back then.....

Ris sia sophia, yupa Sez =C cia dies, r-warb, als vel dia.
<I'll never yield; I'll never be shaken; I'll never stop.>

Ris sia sophia, elma cia kis eyen bie go. Is io miel.
<I hope that everything..... will be the same as that day.>

The young girl raised the *crossed rods* <Rosario> above her head, took aim, and tossed it towards the Yuugenshu with all her might.

The *crossed rods* <Rosario> turned into a flash of silver light. But just before it reached the crystal core of the Yuugenshu, the Yuugenshu began to materialize the deep purple brilliance to form a barrier.

Shinryoku against mateki.

The two opposing forces clashed, and they were currently repelling against each other. If the forces are of equal strength, the shinryoku crystal on the *crossed rods* <Rosario> will then shatter at the same time the barrier is destroyed.

If that was the shinryoku crystal of an ordinary shinryoku practitioner, then that may very well be the result.

However—

"It's my..... victory."

The young girl surrounded by the brilliance of shinryoku said that solemnly as she landed on the ground.

The person standing there was a girl who had pledged to become a Priestess.

An apprentice-Priestess who had endured her tears and pain for eight years, as she continued to bear the dream of becoming a Priestess.

With her blood and her tears as the price, she had obtained the real arts of shinryoku of a Priestess. Naturally, such dignified arts would never lose to an opponent that had only woken up not too long ago.

As such—

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The silver-white *crossed rods* <Rosario> destroyed the remaining two legs of the Yuugenshu along with its barriers. After losing all of its legs and the mateki barrier, the Yuugenshu stopped moving due to it being caged by the barriers of the shinryoku.

"Alright, do you have anything to say?"

Monica showed a gentle smile after landing on the ground. And on the other side—

"It's a really beautiful spell."

Sheltis took aim at the Yuugenshu and soared into the air.

His vision was obscured by his blood and his dizziness.

The functions of his brain were mostly numb, resulting in a chaotic sense of balance. Under the twisted world, the only thing that he believed in was the feel of the two swords in his hands. He raised them over his head, and made a powerful jump.

Using the brightly shining point - the *crossed rods* <Rosario> - as a marker.

He tried his hardest to maintain his consciousness that was about to disappear, and once again took grip of the dual swords, which were about to fall from his hands.

— Let's put an end to everything.

"..... Ymy..... she has begun the disciplines of a Priestess."

"..... So, she asked me to pass this message on to you..... 'Please return safely'."

That was what Syun-rei passed on to him before they left for their mission.

The other reason he didn't collapse.

"..... I must return."

There's a young girl at the tower who believes that he will definitely return. Therefore—

Even if it's unacceptable to the ways of this world, returning to her side is the only thing that cannot be stopped by anything.

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Right now, that was the only thing that he could do for Ymy.

He approaches the head of the Yuugenshu.

Gripping the dual swords in reverse, he raised them up high above his head. And then—

The swords of the dual wielding young man destroyed the crystal core of the Yuugenshu.

{2}

"Ahh..... ugh..... feels like my head is about to burst."

Sheltis sat cross-legged on the floor, and moaned as he pressed his hand against his head.

"It's because you pushed yourself too hard, you idiot."

Next to him was Monica, who was sitting with a straight posture in seiza.

"Well, such things are commonplace, so just ignore him. He's stupid to the point that he can't be cured anymore."

"..... Ughhh, it's so painful, I no longer have the strength to retort to that."

They had finally managed stop his bleeding with the use of anti-hemorrhagic agent and disinfectants, together with a compressor on the wounds using bandages. However, it's not like his wounds were treated just like that. He would still need to receive real treatment when he returned to the *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>.

"Darn, what exactly is Leon doing at a time like this?"

"Speaking of which, I haven't seen Captain Leon either. It's the same as when we were on the floor of the hidden passage—"

"Speak of the devil."

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There were sounds of running that echoed in the passageway. The hurried footsteps stopped right before the door, which then opened immediately after that.

"Sorry for the wait, Sheltis! Where's the enemy, the so called 'Slumbering Child'?"

"Sheltis, where's the enemy!"

"Where—?"

It was Leon, who was carrying a great sword on his shoulder. Behind him, was Eyriey and Yuto, who were both looking around the room.

"....."

"....."

With the three people before them, Sheltis and Monica could only look at each other.

""Sorry, I'm really too tired. Allow me to take a snooze first.""

After saying the exact same thing in sync, the both of them collapsed onto the ground straight away.

Epilogue: The thing in which he protects

Iris shall now be changed to Ilis. I'll explain why later.

Enjoy.

"I've heard you need a month for a full recovery."

"..... I know that."

"But I'll be really bored if that's the case. So please work hard and recover fully within a week."

"..... I'll try my best."

The *crystal machine* <Ilis> was placed on the table next to the bed.

In response to the slow-talking conversation partner, Sheltis could only sigh and turned his body while lying on his bed.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, twenty-second story - the tower's hospital. It's a twenty-four hours operating hospital that takes care of everything within the tower, ranging from the prescription for general colds to the performing of major operations. They open their doors to everyone inside, regardless of whether you are a guard or a staff of the tower.

"Then again, it's really great. The aircraft could operate normally, and the mission was successful as well. Incidentally, you've managed to survive as well."

"So my most important life is actually something of an incidental occurrence to you....."

"Didn't the doctors say so as well? If the impact was slightly off from where it is, your skull would have been smashed, and the pieces would have pierced your brain."

"Whoa— stop! I don't wanna think about it at all!"

Three days ago, Sheltis left the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> in a state close to death, and returned back to *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>. He was taken straight to the hospital for emergency treatment right after he arrived at the tower. It was just a crack on his skull — even though the usage of the word 'just' may be slightly strange, but that was exactly what the

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doctor had said. Considering the fact that they are treating countless of guards who are taken there each and every day, it is of no surprise that the injuries which Sheltis had sustained was nothing more than just a typical injury in their eyes.

"Oh right, there's a total of four person who came to visit you while you were sleeping soundly in the morning."

"Four?"

"Yes, and that is a present for you."

There was a strange looking safety helmet on the table. He was wondering what that thing was.

"Seems like it is named as 'Skull-correcting Helmet'. It will read your brainwaves and adjust the pressure on your head via the machines accordingly, and can reconnect your broken skull in an instant. But beware, do not overuse it."

"..... The only people who'll make such weird machines like that are probably Eyriey and Yuto."

He had not seen the two girls since they jumped off the aircraft with their parachutes. He was worried, and the fact that the girls had made it out of the adventure on the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> without suffering from any major injuries was probably the only blessing amid all the bad luck.

"Out of the remaining two people, the person to come first is Leon. Probably somewhere around four-thirty in the morning."

"Isn't it a little too strange to be visiting at a timing like that?"

"He said he's rushing off for the morning training. And then he said things like how you will have to continue training your body even if you are staying in the hospital..... and the details of the aftermath of the mission."

"Which is?"

"Firstly, the report for the mission was already submitted to the Queen. With that, the mission will be considered as completed, and according to the rules of the reward system, it seemed like you'll be rewarded with a considerable amount of

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points..... however, do remember not to mention to anyone about the mission which you had taken."

The floating island within the airspace of the Government Sector, which was not shown on the map. The unknown facility, the underground passage, as well as the Yuugenshu which was incubated in the water tank.

"The Queen's the one who sent Leon out for this mission, right? If so....."

Queen Salah. The person who stands at the peak of all the shinryoku practitioners of the floating continent; the figure in *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia> who leads the Priestesses. Did she know about the facility found on that floating island?

"....."

"Sheltis?"

Sheltis stared at the ceiling in a daze, with no intention of replying to the *crystal machine* <Ilis>.

— The Forbidden Crystal. That was what the girl had said.

..... Shel..... tis.

Are you the person..... who is looking at me?

..... Looking at the frozen dream of the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> Looking at the Forbidden Crystal.....

The hidden facility was breeding a Yuugenshu. However, what concerned him more was the girl who appeared on the screen. What was the place it was displaying, and who exactly is she?

How did she know who he is?

"....."

After staring into space for quite a while, Sheltis heaved a sigh subconsciously.

"..... A lot of things are beginning to connect together."

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"The things we saw at that facility? The bred Yuugenshu, as well as the girl whom you claimed you saw on the screen. And even more so, the true intentions behind the Queen's orders."

"— And my mateki too."

The Forbidden Crystal, the intentions of the Queen, as well as the Yuugenshu. It is impossible for those three to not have any sort of relations.

If he continue to investigate, he may be able to understand the secrets behind the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> some day.

"So the immediate problem for now is..... the Government Sector huh. Since that facility is located on the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> of the Government Sector."

"Leon seems quite concerned about it as well, but he can only keep those doubts deep in his heart for now. It may be possible for Leon or one of the Priestesses to make a move in the future in regards to that."

"..... You're right. Regardless of how concerned I am about it, I don't have much authority to act since I am just a cadet guard."

"Yes. Therefore, your most pressing problem for now is to raise up to the ranks of a regular guard as quickly as possible, and it will be even better if you can go higher than that. This is so that you can fulfill your promise of heading to Ymy's side, with regards to the mateki in you as well."

After a quick pause, the *crystal machine* <Ilis> continued to flash.

"Don't worry. I'll not lose my way."

That's right. There is no change in his objective.

Which is to continue forward step by step, and climb up the ranks among the guards. That's all there is to it.

"..... Back on topic. I've mentioned about four people visiting you."

"Mmm."

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"The last person was Monica."

To be honest, she was the person who intrigued him the most out of the four persons whom he traveled with to the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>. Moreover, they had discussed about many complicated topics during the course of the mission as well. How is she doing after the completion of the mission?

"She said you looked fine, and she'll be coming another time."

"..... I see."

"Your expressions suggested that you've just heaved a sigh of relieve?"

"Mmm, perhaps."

He laid on the side of his body, and looked at the bright windows beside him.

"I guess Monica should probably be fine already. Regardless of what sort of missions she will be facing in the future."

"..... That is probably what that person is thinking of right now."

As she sat down at her designated seat beneath the tree, Monica wiped off the sweat on her neck.

The outdoor training field was scorched by the blazing sun, and that day was just the same as any other. The hollers of the instructor were ringing throughout the place, and the new cadet-guards were all running with timid expressions.

The young man with tea-red colored hair was nowhere to be seen among them.

"He needs a rest, but there's no danger to his life, and there won't be any complications huh....."

— That's great.

Compared to her first ever successful completion of a mission, she was much more pleased about how they had managed to return back safely.

..... However, there were a few things which she wished to question him.

Sheltis was exposed to the mateki openly while he was engaging the Yuugenshu, but he managed to get out unscathed.

His life will be in danger once he is exposed to mateki — but despite her telling him that, and the fact that she had learned purification spells during her time as an apprentice-Priestess, he repeatedly stressed that he was fine, and insistently denied to receive her purification. And in actual fact, nothing has happened to him even after he had come into contact with the mateki.

Why is that so?

"....."

— Phew.

After staring into space for a while, Monica made a slight wry smile, and looked at the turf beneath her feet.

"Forget it. It's rude to question a patient about things like these anyway."

"Monica."

She once again lifted her head when she heard that voice.

Instructor Yumelda was standing right in front of her, wearing her suit and smoking on a stick of cigarette.

"How very surprising for you to actually accept a mission."

"Eh?"

"No point playing dumb. With the authority of an instructor, I know every single detail about each reward points awarded to all the cadet guards."

..... That's bad.

So the instructor before her actually checked through the reward points of the few hundred cadet guards personally each day?

"Right, who did you go with?"

"Well....."

"Hmm? Well, since you have no intention of telling me, I won't ask you that much about the details."

The female instructor placed the lighted cigarette into her hand and twirled it around smoothly.

"However, it has already been three years since you've become a cadet guard. Ignoring about the current situation, it's about time for you to consider joining a squad."

"....."

"Hmph, I knew things will turn out like this."

With that, she fished out an application form from the front of her chest.

"This is?"

"The application form for a squad. Not to join one, but to start one. I have originally intended to tell you about it, but with the successful completion of your mission this time, I guess this is a good opportunity for you as well?"

A smile appeared on the edges of the instructor's lips.

"There's no need for you to ask the other squads to accept you in. You just have to start a new squad yourself."

..... Me?

"You do know that we have close to twenty newcomers this month. One of whom is an idiot who has injured himself at his very first mission."

The instructor looked at the rising smoke with a profound smile on her face—

"You and that fella had performed pretty well during that paired battle, yeah?"

"..... Eh?"

"In any case, you're free to choose whoever you like."

With that, she turned around and walked away coolly without even waiting for Monica's reply.

The squad's name, squad members, as well as the name of the squad leader was left blank on the application form in her hands.

Monica grabbed onto the piece of paper tightly with her hands that were stained with dirty water, while she stood by herself.

"..... Can I do it?"

A new squad.

Teammates who clear missions with me, and strive towards becoming a regular guard together.

And the first person to appear in her mind was—

"If..... I am the one inviting him this time, will he be willing to join me?"

Monica folded the application form carefully, then picked up her *crossed rods* <Rosario>.

After listening to the reports of the *crystal machine* <Ilis>, Sheltis fell into a slumber yet again. An unknown amount of time had passed since then.

He was lying on his bed when he opened his eyes.

What appeared before his eyes when he looked upwards was neither the lights nor the ceilings, but the face of a girl.

A young girl with pale golden long hair, wearing a pure white vestment.

"..... Ymy?"

"Ah, you're awake."

The girl who was staring at his face showed a gentle smile, and went back to take a seat at the chair next to the bed.

He felt rather embarrassed for his sleeping looks to be seen by her. He forced his sluggish and sleepy body prop itself up on the bed.

"Sheltis, you don't have to force yourself. Just continue sleeping."

"It feels really embarrassing to sleep like this."

"What do you mean? You're weird."

Ymy covered her mouth and let out a laugh.

"Oh right Ymy, is it okay for you to be here?"

They were at the twenty-second story of *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*>. There will be a huge commotion should a nurse or a staff see a Priestess appearing at a low-level floor.

"This is a ward for a single person, so it's fine. And you may not have noticed, but it is currently night time."

"Two in the morning. The lights in the wards have long been switched off."

The originally silent *crystal machine* <*Ilis*> on the table suddenly said that, before falling into silence yet again.

"It's been tough on you. I've heard from Leon that the mission this time is not that easy."

Ymy slowly reached out her hand towards his bandaged head — and stopped right before she was about to touch him. The fingertips that cannot touch him.



They were separated by the shinryoku and the mateki, and forced apart by an absolute blank territory which can never be overcome.

"Who were you protecting, for you to suffer from those injuries?"

"..... Why?"

Why could she say that with such certainty?

"Because the reason for your injuries is usually because you were fighting for someone."

The young girl who is his childhood friend showed a slightly sorrowful smile.

He knew that very well, but he still did not wish to see it with his own eyes — that smile on her face.

Therefore, Sheltis replied with a single sentence.

"She's the same as you."

"The same?"

"The same as how Ymy trains hard everyday, so that you can become a Priestess."

In response to the young girl's widened eyes, he continued on,

"I happen to hear it by chance from a girl who used to be an apprentice-Priestess. The Priestesses has always been looked upon as someone really incredible, or an incredibly sacred existence..... me included, I've always had that sort of impression."

But that's wrong.

Beneath those beautiful smiles, what sort of painful disciplines must the Priestesses and those aspiring to be one suffer?

"The Priestesses who live on the top floors of the *Tenketsu Palace* <*Sophia*> are alone. In order to protect the floating continent, they have devoted their whole lives to training and maintaining the barrier. However, who will be the ones to save them from their suffering?"

When Monica told him that, he swore that he will say this to Ymy,

"It's been tough on Ymy too. You must have underwent the disciplines for the barriers, and that's the reason for you to come here at such a time, right?"

"....."

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For a brief moment, she looked like she was about to cry, but she tried her best to hold back her tears.

Ymy turned her face away in embarrassment.

"Eh? Ehehe..... it just feels a little regrettable. I originally hoped that you can say that to me personally after you've become a Sennenshi..... However, I am still really happy."

"Mmm, I'll do my best to become a Sennenshi."

During the latest mission, he finally understood how far away the goal was from him, especially back when he was walking towards it without any sense of direction.

As the him of three years ago did not know anything about it, he had neglected the steps which he should have taken. It was perhaps due to that very reason that he had slipped and fell to the ranks of the cadet guards, right at the very bottom.

However, it seems like he now has the confidence to climb upwards, one step at a time.

"But thank god that you are not in a life-threatening state."

Ymy placed her hand on her chest and heaved a sigh of relief.

"I really won't know what to do if Sheltis were to fall into a state of coma just like that."

"That's just exaggerating. See, ain't I all fine here?"

"You can't— You can never take things too lightly!"

..... There's really nothing I can do about you.

He showed a wry smile upon hearing Ymy berating him with a tone akin to a mother who is scolding her child.

"It's really unlike Ymy, for you to be that worried."

"....."

He originally thought she would deny it angrily, but instead, she lowered her head.

"..... Because....."

"Ymy?"

"Because..... what am I going to do if you didn't come back, just like how things were three years ago?"

The young man fell off from the floating continent into the *Garden of Corrupted Song* <Eden> during a mission three years ago, and he never came back. This time, the mission required him to head towards the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon> - the young girl was afraid that the same thing would happen again. Her slightly trembling shoulders were clearly displaying the state of feelings which she was in.

At the same time, Ymy's previous words reappeared in Sheltis' mind.

After listening to Leon explanation about the mission at the two hundred and eighty-seventh story, she actually made a request. If he remembered right—

"L-Look, Leon. I want to tag along too..... can I?"

"Could it be, the reason for you to want to join us in the mission, is because—"

"..... Will you laugh at me if I say it's because I was afraid?"

The fear in her. The fear that the young man, who have finally returned back to *Tenketsu Palace* <Sophia>, will once again never come back after heading off to the *Floating Archipelagos* <Lagoon>.

Due to the uneasiness in her, Ymy had voiced out her request for joining along as well.

"— No."

Sheltis shook his head as he looked at Ymy, who was still lowering her head.

"Thank you for worrying about me, but I am really fine."

"..... Mmm."

Ymy finally raised up her head. The expression in her eyes was just like that of a lonely orphan, which caused him to had an indescribable feeling of affection towards her.

"It's about time you take a rest. You must be tired, yeah?"

"..... You're right. I'll do just that."

After standing up from the chair, Ymy took a deep breath. Those emerald eyes of hers looked like they were about to shut tight, perhaps due to her fatigue.

"Well then, Sheltis. I hope you can recover quickly. Within three days."

"..... Somehow, it feels like Ilis was a little too benevolent, since she told me to get well within a week earlier on."

"Fufu, I am just joking. Goodbye—"

The silent ward. After waiting for the sound of her footsteps to gradually disappear—

"—How tiring."

Sheltis collapsed back onto his bed.

"One of the cute things about you is how you love to act tough."

"Hmm?"

"It must have been really difficult for you to prop up your upper body just now, right? The doctor did say you'll be temporarily experiencing giddiness and headache."

"..... How can I possibly say such things in front of Ymy?"

He heaved a heavy sigh towards the *crystal machine* <Ilis> on the table.

"That does make sense. If not, she'll probably be even more worried about you."

"She is such a worrywart. And for her to specially come down to the hospital..... has she forgotten about her position as a Priestess?"

"Oh— But you are really happy to see how concerned she is for you, right?"

"..... I don't know."

He pretended not to hear Ilis' snickers.

Sheltis then pulled the thin blanket over his head and shut his eyes.